



Just the Facts...

Stress and Rescue Operations Performance

Stress is the response of the body and mind to change.

Extreme stress results in reflexes that ready the body for fight or flight. It also involves mental reactions. Effects include decreased blood flow to skin, muscles, and heart; increased sweating; adrenaline release for energy and alertness; muscle tension; and interference with sleep. Rescue Operations produce stress.

There is an optimal range of stress for any given task.

- **Too little stress** causes the person to be easily distracted, make errors of omission, or fall asleep.
- **Too much stress** causes a person to be easily distracted as well, or too focused on one aspect of the task. He or she may not know when and how to act.
- **Extreme stress (distress)** may cause the person to become immobilized by fear and freeze or become agitated and flee in disoriented panic.
- **If distress persists too long**, it can cause physical and mental illnesses.

Sleep deprivation increases stress.

The sleep-deprived person has trouble keeping his or her mind focused. People with sleep-loss fatigue usually appear tired and slowed down, or they may be speeded up, hyperactive, and irritable.

They usually take longer to accomplish tasks, and may omit steps, miss signals, fall asleep, or hallucinate.

Rescue Operations Stress Reaction occurs when physical and mental distress overwhelms a rescue worker.

Sometimes people react poorly to distress, with substance abuse, family violence, recklessness, and inappropriate relationships.

Rescue Operations Stress Reaction can be helped by:

- ✓ **Reassurance.**
- ✓ **Rest and sleep.**
- ✓ **Fluids and food.**
- ✓ **Hygiene** (washing up with warm or cool water and putting on clean clothing).
- ✓ **A chance to talk** about what happened.
- ✓ **Restore the person's identity and confidence** with useful and less demanding work.

If you observe symptoms of distress in yourself or another, try talking to a fellow worker, taking a break with food and water, and clean up a bit to get back on track. Pace yourself to last for the long haul.

For more information or help contact your supervisor, a chaplain, or healthcare provider.

