UNIT 7: DISASTER PSYCHOLOGY

In this unit you will learn about:

- **Disaster Psychology:** The psychological impact of a disaster on rescuers and victims, and how to provide "psychological first aid."
- **Caring for Yourself, Your Buddy, and Victims:** Steps one can take individually and as part of a CERT before, immediately following, and after a disaster.

UNIT 7: DISASTER PSYCHOLOGY

OBJECTIVES	At the conclusion of this unit, the participants should be able to: ▪ Describe the post-disaster emotional environment. ▪ Describe the steps that rescuers can take to relieve their own stressors and those of disaster survivors.
SCOPE	The scope of this unit will include: ▪ Introduction and Unit Overview. ▪ Dealing with Survivors' Trauma. ▪ Dealing with CERT Members' Stress. ▪ Unit Summary.
ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME	45 minutes
TRAINING METHODS	The Lead Instructor will begin this unit by welcoming the participants to Unit 7: Disaster Psychology, and will introduce the instructors for the session. The Instructor will then present a brief overview of this session. Next, the Instructor will explain the importance of having an understanding of the disaster and post-disaster emotional environment and the impact that the emotional crisis may have on CERT members as well as victims. The Instructor will present the psychological and physiological symptoms that victims and rescue personnel may exhibit and provide some suggestions for how CERT members can help survivors cope with disaster trauma and control their own stress.
RESOURCES REQUIRED	▪ *Community Emergency Response Team* Instructor Guide ▪ *Community Emergency Response Team* Participant Handbook ▪ Visuals 7.1 through 7.15
EQUIPMENT	The following additional equipment is required for this unit: ▪ A computer with PowerPoint software ▪ Computer projector and screen

NOTES

A suggested time plan for this unit is as follows:

Introduction and Unit Overview ..... 5 minutes
Dealing with Survivors' Trauma..... 15 minutes
Dealing with CERT Members' Stress ..... 20 minutes
Unit Summary..... 5 minutes

Total Time: 45 minutes

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The information from this unit has been provided by Victor Welzant, Psy.D. and George Everly, Jr., Ph.D. of the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation; and Joanne Tortorici Luna, Ph.D., California State University, Long Beach, and Culver City, California CERT. The Federal Emergency Management Agency wishes to thank them for their assistance.

UNIT 7: DISASTER PSYCHOLOGY

INTRODUCTION AND UNIT OVERVIEW

INTRODUCE UNIT

Introduce the instructors for this unit and ask any new instructors to briefly describe their experience with disaster psychology.

Stress the need for CERT members to prepare themselves for their role during and following a disaster by learning about the possible impact of disaster on them and others, emotionally and physically. This knowledge will help CERT members understand and manage their reactions to the event and to work better with others.

INSTRUCTOR'S NOTE

Remind the group that they recently learned about team organization. Point out that team organization concepts can help them both operationally and psychologically. Working together and looking out for each other is an important aspect of successful teams.

Tell the group that this unit will address techniques for managing one's personal situation so that the needs of the victims and those of CERT team members can be met.

VISUAL 7.1

INTRODUCTION AND UNIT OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

Unit Objectives

1. Describe the disaster and post-disaster emotional environment.
2. Describe the steps that rescuers can take to relieve their own stress and those of disaster survivors.

Visual 7.1

Tell the participants that at the end of this unit, they should be able to:

- Describe the disaster and post-disaster emotional environment.
- Describe the steps that rescuers can take to relieve their own stress and those of disaster survivors.

VISUAL 7.2

TEAM WELL-BEING

Introduce this section by telling the participants that, during a disaster, they may see and hear things that will be extremely unpleasant.

Vicarious Trauma

The process of change in the rescuer resulting from empathic engagement with survivors

Visual 7.2

Explain that vicarious trauma is the process of change in the rescuer resulting from empathic engagement with survivors. Explain that it is an “occupational hazard” for helpers.

Warn the participants against overidentifying with the survivors. Caution them against taking on the survivors’ feelings as their own. Advise the group that taking ownership of others’ problems will compound their own stress and affect the CERT’s overall effectiveness.

Caution the participants to be alert to signs of disaster trauma in themselves, as well as in disaster victims, so that they can take steps to alleviate stress.

VISUAL 7.3

TEAM WELL-BEING (CONTINUED)

Possible Psychological Symptoms

- Irritability, anger
- Self-blame, blaming others
- Isolation, withdrawal
- Fear of recurrence
- Feeling stunned, numb, or overwhelmed
- Feeling helpless
- Mood swings
- Sadness, depression, grief
- Denial
- Concentration, memory problems
- Relationship conflicts/marital discord

Visual 7.3

Give examples of the types of psychological and physiological responses that may be observed in rescuers after a disaster.

Psychological symptoms may include:

- Irritability or anger.
- Self-blame or the blaming of others.
- Isolation and withdrawal.
- Fear of recurrence.
- Feeling stunned, numb, or overwhelmed.
- Feeling helpless.
- Mood swings.
- Sadness, depression, and grief.
- Denial.
- Concentration and memory problems.
- Relationship conflicts/marital discord.

VISUAL 7.4

TEAM WELL-BEING (CONTINUED)

Possible Physiological Symptoms

- Loss of appetite
- Headaches, chest pain
- Diarrhea, stomach pain, nausea
- Hyperactivity
- Increase in alcohol or drug consumption
- Nightmares
- Inability to sleep
- Fatigue, low energy

Visual 7.4

Physiological symptoms may include:

- Loss of appetite.
- Headaches or chest pain.
- Diarrhea, stomach pain, or nausea.
- Hyperactivity.
- Increase in alcohol or drug consumption.
- Nightmares.
- The inability to sleep.
- Fatigue or low energy.

VISUAL 7.5

TEAM WELL-BEING (CONTINUED)

Team Well-Being

CERT team leaders should:

- Provide pre-disaster stress management training.
- Brief personnel before response.
- Emphasize teamwork.
- Encourage breaks.
- Provide for proper nutrition.
- Rotate.
- Phase out workers gradually.
- Conduct a brief discussion.
- Arrange for a post-event debriefing.

Visual 7.5

Explain that there are steps that CERT team leaders can take to reduce the stress on rescue workers before, during, and after an incident:

- Provide pre-disaster stress management training to all CERT personnel.
- Brief CERT personnel before the effort begins on what they can expect to see and what they can expect in terms of emotional response in the survivors and themselves.
- Emphasize that the CERT is a team. Sharing the workload and emotional load can help defuse pent-up emotions.
- Encourage rescuers to rest and re-group so that they can avoid becoming overtired.
- Direct rescuers to take breaks away from the incident area, to get relief from the stressors of the effort.
- Encourage rescuers to eat properly and maintain fluid intake throughout the operation. Explain that they should drink water or other electrolyte-replacing fluids, and avoid drinks with caffeine or refined sugar.
- Rotate teams for breaks or new duties (i.e., from high-stress to low-stress jobs). Team members can talk with each other about their experiences. This is very important for their psychological health.

TEAM WELL-BEING (CONTINUED)

- Phase out workers gradually. Gradually phase them from high- to low-stress areas of the incident.
- Conduct a brief discussion (defusing) with workers after the shift, in which workers describe what they encountered and express their feelings about it.
- Arrange for a debriefing 1 to 3 days after the event in which workers describe what they encountered and express their feelings about it in a more in-depth way.

CERT leaders may invite a mental health professional trained in Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) to conduct a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD).

Explain that a CISD is a formal group process held between 1 to 3 days after the event and is designed to help emergency services personnel and volunteers cope with a traumatic event.

VISUAL 7.6

TEAM WELL-BEING (CONTINUED)

Reducing Stress

- Get enough sleep.
- Exercise.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Balance work, play, and rest.
- Allow yourself to receive as well as give. Remember that your identity is broader than that of a helper.
- Connect with others.
- Use spiritual resources.

Visual 7.6

Remind the group that they should spend some time thinking about other ways to reduce stress personally. Emphasize that only they know what makes them able to reduce stress within themselves and that expending the effort required to find personal stress reducers is worthwhile before an incident occurs. Remind the participants that they can take the following preventive steps in their everyday lives:

- Get enough sleep.
- Exercise.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Balance work, play, and rest.
- Allow themselves to receive as well as give. They should remember that their identity is broader than that of a helper.
- Connect with others.
- Use spiritual resources.

Point out that experienced rescue workers find these steps helpful in controlling their stress levels, but that, in some cases, it might be necessary to seek help from mental health professionals.

VISUAL 7.7

TEAM WELL-BEING (CONTINUED)

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

Seven phases:

- Introductions and a description
- Review of the factual material
- Sharing of initial thoughts/feelings
- Sharing of emotional reactions to the incident
- Instruction about normal stress reactions
- Review of the symptoms
- Closing and further needs assessment

Visual 7.7

Point out that CISD is one type of intervention within a more comprehensive, multicomponent crisis intervention system that is based on a careful assessment of the needs of a group or individual. CISD should not be used as a stand-alone intervention but should be used in conjunction with other types of intervention.

Explain that a CISD has seven phases:

- Introductions and a description of the process, including assurance of confidentiality
- Review of the factual material about the incident
- Sharing of initial thoughts/feelings about the incident
- Sharing of emotional reactions to the incident
- Review of the symptoms of stress experienced by the participants
- Instruction about normal stress reactions
- Closing and further needs assessment

TEAM WELL-BEING (CONTINUED)

Emphasize that participation in CISD should be voluntary.

Tell the group that to schedule a CISD, they should contact the Red Cross, local emergency management agency, or community mental health agency. They could also ask their local fire or police department for help in contacting the appropriate person.

VISUAL 7.8

WORKING WITH SURVIVORS' TRAUMA

Phases of a Crisis

- Impact
- Inventory
- Rescue
- Recovery

Visual 7.8

Tell the group that research studies show survivors go through distinct emotional phases following a disaster:

- In the impact phase, survivors do not panic and may, in fact, show no emotion.
- In the inventory phase, which immediately follows the event, survivors assess damage and try to locate other survivors. During this phase, routine social ties tend to be discarded in favor of the more functional relationships required for initial response activities (e.g., search and rescue).
- In the rescue phase, emergency services personnel (including CERTs) are responding and survivors are willing to take their direction from these groups without protest. This is why CERT identification (helmets, vests, etc.) is important.
- In the recovery phase, the survivors appear to pull together against their rescuers, the emergency services personnel.

Tell the participants that they should expect that survivors will show psychological effects from the disaster—and that they should expect that some of the psychological warfare will be directed toward them.

VISUAL 7.9

WORKING WITH SURVIVORS' TRAUMA (CONTINUED)

Traumatic Crisis

An event in which people experience or witness:

- Actual or potential death or injury to self or others.
- Serious injury.
- Destruction of homes, neighborhood, or valued possessions.
- Loss of contact with family/close relationships.

Visual 7.9

Introduce this section by defining a crisis as an event that is experienced or witnessed in which people's ability to cope is overwhelmed:

- Actual or potential death or injury to self or others.
- Serious injury.
- Destruction of their homes, neighborhood, or valued possessions.
- Loss of contact with family members or close friends.

VISUAL 7.10

WORKING WITH SURVIVORS' TRAUMA (CONTINUED)

Traumatic Stress

Traumatic stress may affect:

- Cognitive functioning.
- Physical health.
- Interpersonal reactions.

Visual 7.10

Traumatic stress may affect:

- Cognitive functioning. Those who have suffered traumatic stress many act irrationally, have difficulty making decisions; or may act in ways that are out of character or them normally. They may have difficulty sharing or retrieving memories.
- Physical health. Traumatic stress can cause a range of physical symptoms—from exhaustion to heat problems.
- Interpersonal relationships. Those who survive traumatic stress my undergo temporary or long-term personality changes that make interpersonal relationships difficult.

VISUAL 7.11

WORKING WITH SURVIVORS' TRAUMA (CONTINUED)

Mediating Factors

- Prior experience with a similar event
- The intensity of the disruption in the survivors' lives
- Individual feelings that there is no escape, which sets the stage for panic
- The emotional strength of the individual
- The length of time that has elapsed between the event occurrence and the present

Visual 7.11

Explain that the strength and type of personal reaction vary because of:

- The person's prior experience with the same or a similar event. The emotional effect of multiple events can be cumulative, leading to greater stress reactions.
- The intensity of the disruption in the survivors' lives. The more the survivors' lives are disrupted, the greater their psychological and physiological reactions may become.
- The meaning of the event to the individual. The more catastrophic the victim perceives the event to be to him or her personally, the more intense will be his or her stress reaction.
- The emotional well-being of the individual and the resources (especially social) that he or she has to cope. People who have had other recent traumas may not cope with additional stresses.
- The length of time that has elapsed between the event's occurrence and the present. The reality of the event takes time to "sink in."

WORKING WITH SURVIVORS' TRAUMA (CONTINUED)

Caution the group, however, that they should not take the survivors' surface attitudes personally. Rescuers may expect to see a range of responses that will vary from person to person, but the responses they see will be part of the psychological impact of the event—and probably will not relate to anything that the CERTs have or have not done.

VISUAL 7.12

Stabilizing Individuals

- Assess the survivors for injury and shock.
- Get uninjured people involved in helping.
- Provide support by:
  - Listening.
  - Empathizing.
- Help survivors connect with natural support systems.

Visual 7.12

Explain that the goal of on-scene psychological intervention on the part of CERT members should be to stabilize the incident scene by stabilizing individuals. Suggest that they do this in the following ways:

- Assess the survivors for injury and shock. Address any medical needs first. Observe them to determine their level of responsiveness and whether they pose a danger to themselves or to others.
- Get uninjured people involved in helping. Focused activity helps to move people beyond shock, so give them constructive jobs to do, such as running for supplies. This strategy is especially effective for survivors who are being disruptive.

WORKING WITH SURVIVORS' TRAUMA (CONTINUED)

- Provide support by:
  - Listening to them talk about their feelings and their physical needs. Victims often need to talk about what they've been through—and they want someone to listen to them.
  - Empathizing. Show by your responses that you hear their concerns. Victims want to know that someone else shares their feelings of pain and grief.
- Help survivors connect to natural support systems, such as family, friends, or clergy.

Stress that, survivors that show evidence of being suicidal, psychotic, or unable to care for themselves should be referred to mental health professionals for support. (This will be infrequent in most groups of survivors.)

VISUAL 7.13

Avoid Saying . . .

- "I understand."
- "Don't feel bad."
- "You're strong/You'll get through this."
- "Don't cry."
- "It's God's will."
- "It could be worse" or "At least you still have …"

Visual 7.13

Tell the participants that, when providing support, they should avoid saying the following phrases. On the surface, these phrases are meant to comfort the survivors, but they do not show an understanding of the person's feelings.

- "I understand." In most situations we cannot understand unless we have had the same experience.
- "Don't feel bad." The survivor has a right to feel bad and will need time to feel differently.

WORKING WITH SURVIVORS' TRAUMA (CONTINUED)

- "You're strong/You'll get through this." Many survivors do not feel strong and question if they will recover from the loss.
- "Don't cry." It is ok to cry.
- "It's God's will." Giving religious meaning to an event to a person you do not know may insult or anger the person.
- "It could be worse" or "At least you still have …" It is up to the individual to decide whether things could be worse.

Emphasize that these types of responses could elicit a strong negative response or distance the survivor from you.

Point out that it is ok to apologize if the survivor reacts negatively to something that you said.

VISUAL 7.14

Managing the Death Scene

- Cover the body; treat it with respect.
- Have one family member look at the body and decide if the rest of the family should see it.
- Allow family members to hold or spend time with the deceased.
- Let the family grieve.

Visual 7.14

Explain that one unpleasant task that CERT members may face is managing the family members at the scene of the death of a loved one. Suggest the guidelines below (T.W. Dietz, 2001; J.M. Tortorici Luna, 2002) for dealing with this situation:

- Cover the body; treat it with respect. Wrap mutilated bodies tightly.
- Have one family member look at the body and decide if the rest of the family should see it.

WORKING WITH SURVIVORS' TRAUMA (CONTINUED)

- Allow family members to hold or spend time with the deceased. Stay close by, but don't watch—try to distance yourself emotionally.
- Let the family grieve. Don't try to comfort them out of a need to alleviate your own discomfort.

VISUAL 7.15

Informing Family of a Death

- Separate the family members from others in a quiet, private place.
- Have the person(s) sit down, if possible.
- Make eye contact and use a calm, kind voice.
- Use the following words to tell the family members about the death: "I'm sorry, but your family member has died. I am so sorry."

Visual 7.15

In some cases, the family may not know of the death of their loved one, and CERT members may be called upon to tell them. Suggest that in this situation, CERT members:

- Separate the family members from others in a quiet, private place.
- Have the person(s) sit down, if possible.
- Make eye contact and use a calm, kind voice.
- Use the following words to tell the family members about the death: "I'm sorry, but your family member has died. I am so sorry."

UNIT SUMMARY

ASK QUESTION

After answering all of the participants' questions, pose some "What would you do if . . ." questions to ensure that they understand the concepts of this section. For example, ask the participants, "What would you do if you were attempting to rescue a victim and the victim became hysterical?"

INSTRUCTOR'S NOTE

Ask the participants if anyone has any questions about the types of emotional and physiological responses that they can expect to see during and following a disaster.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

HANDOUT

Thank the participants for attending, and remind them of the date and time for the next session, if necessary.