

Caring For Yourself in the Face of Difficult Work

Caring For Yourself

This factsheet covers the basics of self-care for disaster workers and volunteers including healthy sleeping, eating, exercise, and social interaction. The bottom line is to avoid radical changes to normal life patterns.

Sleep Deprivation is Hazardous?

Driving, operating heavy machinery or performing hazardous tasks while sleepy can be dangerous to you and your coworkers.

According to the National Institutes of Health's, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute¹, sleep deprivation occurs when you have one of the following:

You don't get enough sleep; 7 - 8 hours for adults.
You sleep at the wrong time of day.
You don't sleep well or deeply.
You have a sleep disorder.

Sleep deprivation is linked to many chronic diseases and depression. It is also linked to increased risk of injury. It is a common myth that people can learn to get by on little sleep with no negative effects. After losing 1-2 hours of sleep over a couple of nights, functioning suffers.

Signs and Symptoms

How sleepy you feel during the day can help you figure out whether you're having symptoms of problem sleepiness. You might be sleep deficient if you often feel like you could doze off during normal activities.

Tips

It is common for disaster workers and volunteers to work long hours. To the extent that you have control over your schedule, it is very important to practice healthy sleeping habits:

- If your accommodations are noisy, earplugs may be helpful.
- Eye covers may help if the sleeping area has too much light.
- Limiting 'screen time' (electronic device use and TV's) prior to sleep
- Avoid heavy meals, alcohol, tobacco or caffeine prior to bed.

¹ NIH website accessed 8/4/2014: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/sdd/>.



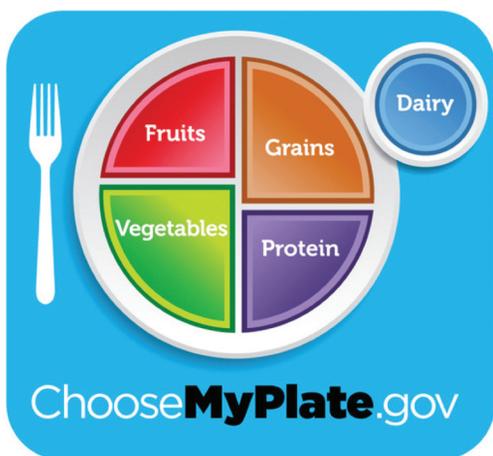
Are you eating well?

Disaster workers and volunteers are often confronted with unhealthy eating choices such as donuts, the bottomless coffee pot, pizza, or just a lack of access to nutritious alternatives. Consuming large amounts of sugar, fat, and other unhealthy food and snacks can increase stress on our minds and bodies. Importantly, energy and caffeinated drinks may provide a temporary boost, but the let down is rapid and deep. These should be avoided if one is tired. The only thing that can cure sleep deficit is sleep.

The 2010 U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans describe a healthy diet as one that:

Emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products.
Includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts.
Is low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, sodium (salt), and added sugars.
Stays within your calorie needs.

Learn more about the Dietary Guidelines for Americans at: <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines>.



Are You Getting Any Exercise?

Regular physical activity is one of the most important things you can do for your health. It is a very effective way of reducing stress and relaxing.

Fitting exercise into your schedule may be difficult, especially when you are doing exhausting disaster work. But even ten minutes at a time is fine. The key is to find the right exercise for you. It should be fun and should match your abilities. Brief walks are a great outlet for your mind and body.

Are You Interacting With Others?

Making contact with others can help reduce feelings of distress and help people recover in the aftermath of traumatic events. Connections can be with family, friends, clergy, or others who are coping with the same traumatic event. For more detail see the accompanying factsheet entitled, **“Connecting with Others, Giving and Receiving Social Support”**.