

EMOTIONAL REACTIONS



Information for Emergency Responders on Human Reactions

In your work with critical incidents, you are likely to hear graphic information regarding what others have seen, smelled, and handled. Working with or around human remains may arouse strong feelings of pity, horror, repulsion, disgust, and anger and the senselessness of this tragedy. As a result of listening to others talk about these difficult situations, you may find yourself reacting emotionally. These reactions are normal and a part of being human. You may feel emotionally numb, or you may even use “gallows humor” to make the suffering and death seem less terrible. These are also normal responses. Strong emotions or reactions may be most painful when a victim is a child, or reminds you of someone you love, or of yourself. Even if you’ve worked in disaster environments before you may react differently than you have in the past. Remember strong emotions are honorable and they confirm your humanity.

Here are lessons learned by other people who have worked with bodies in disaster environments. Although these tips cannot make a horrible event easy they will help you continue to work, and to live with your experiences and memories:

- Remember the larger purpose of your work. By recovering bodies for identification and respectful burial you are showing care, giving hope, and preventing disease for the living.
- It may be difficult to prepare yourself mentally for what you will see and do. Specific information about job requirements and the experience of others can be helpful.
- Talking with others while working and during down time is very important. This helps prevent getting lost in your own thoughts or emotions.
- Help others in distress by being a good listener. Don’t mistake expression of feelings for weakness. Remind others that strong emotions are normal and honorable.
- Humor is a good stress release. Even “gallows humor” privately among friends may be helpful but this will be offensive to some. Don’t get too gross or too personal and if it is your only coping mechanism, it may not be helpful.