

“ARE YOU REALLY PREPARED”

Having your amateur radio license doesn't make you an effective emergency communicator any more than a driver's license makes a newly licensed teenager a good motorist. Becoming an effective emergency communicator is a matter of training and experience. Training gives you the background knowledge to what to do and experience teaches you how to do them in the most effective way. This is why it is important to Practice, practice, practice. Training and experience are not exclusive from one another. If you have a lot of one, you need to obtain the other to be effective. Additionally, you can do both at the same time. Whether you just got your license, or you are an "old-timer" training and experience is the best tools you can have to be an effective emergency communicator.

We must understand, as emergency communications specialist that certain responsibilities come with such a job. First, we must conduct ourselves in a professional manner. This isn't just limited to being polite, not getting in the way or how we provide communications, but also how we handle the emotional stresses we encounter.

ARES members should prepare themselves for their role during and following a disaster by learning about the possible impact of disaster on themselves and others, both emotionally and physically. This knowledge will help you understand and manage their reactions to an event and to work better with others. During a disaster operation, you may see and hear things that will be extremely unpleasant. In the event of an earthquake, a tornado or other types of disasters, we may witness the destruction of homes that we have visited, business that we use to frequent, the Churches that we attended, loss of contact with family members and friends, we may see injured people we know or may not know, fatalities of children you may have seen playing, fires and a host of other unpleasant things that do happen during disasters.

It may be one of the hardest things you have ever done, but do not over identify with the survivors. Do not take on the survivors feelings as your own. Taking ownership of others problems will compound your stress and affect your overall effectiveness.

You need to be alert to the signs of disaster trauma in yourself and your team members so you can take steps to alleviate stress.

Some of the Psychological symptoms you may encounter include:

1. Irritability or anger.
2. Self-blame or the blaming of others.
3. Isolation and withdrawal.
4. Fear of recurrence.
5. Feeling stunned, numb, or overwhelmed.
6. Feeling helpless.
7. Mood swings.
8. Sadness, depression, and grief.
9. Denial.
10. Concentration and memory problems.

There are steps that you and the ARES team leaders should take to promote team well-being before, during, and after an incident:

1. Provide pre-disaster stress management training to all members.
2. Brief members before the effort begins on what they can expect to see and what they can expect in terms of emotional response in themselves.
3. Emphasize that ARES is a team. Sharing the workload and emotional load can help defuse pent-up emotions.
4. Encourage members to rest and re-group so they can avoid becoming overtired.
5. Direct members to take breaks away from the incident area, to get relief from the stressors of the effort.
6. Encourage members 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.

7. 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.
8. Phase out workers gradually. Gradually phase them from high- to low-stress areas of the incident.
9. Conduct a brief discussion with members after their shift, in which members describe what they encountered and express their feelings about it.
10. Arrange for a debriefing 1 to 3 days after the event in which ARES members describe what they encountered and express their feelings about it in a more in-depth way.

You should also spend some time thinking about other ways to reduce stress personally. Only you know what makes you able to reduce stress within yourself. Expending the effort required to find personal stress reducers is worthwhile before an incident occurs. You can take the following preventive steps in your everyday life:

1. Get enough sleep.
2. Exercise.
3. Eat a balanced diet.
4. Balance work, play, and rest.
5. Allow yourself to receive as well as give.
6. Connect with others.

Folks, here in Arkansas it is possible that we could experience or witness an event such as a tornado or earthquake in which our ability to cope is overwhelmed. For each and every one of us, it is extremely important that we as ARES members have the necessary training and experience.