

Operational Stress - An Educational Experience

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In February of 2003, Lexington, KY faced a severe ice storm. For 8 days, amateur radio operators worked to help the local government with communications to the electric utility, shelters, and other locations. Because of the level of the disaster, available manpower was slim, and the brunt of the operation fell on the shoulders of a few. Please accept the following lessons learned from that incident that may help you cope with the unique circumstances that will confront you in a disaster operation.

One of the keys to successfully responding to a disaster is the management of operational stress. The lower you can keep your stress level, the better you can handle the rigors of working in a disaster and respond to changing conditions. Let's look at five ways to reduce operational stress. Understanding the concepts of "Home and family first," preparing for the response, having understanding, having patience, and knowing your limits will serve you well.

"Home and family first," has always applied to all types of disaster response personnel. There are two reasons for this. First and foremost persons whose human needs who are not met are part of the disaster. Secondly, if you do not know your family is safe, you will most likely become a liability to the operation. Your concern is with them, and your energies are targeted towards trying to secure their needs and not your task. Mistakes made during emergencies can adversely affect a large number of people.

Never feel shame if you need to take time and secure the needs of your family. Let your amateur radio coordinator know, and if you can secure their safety, offer your assistance later in the crisis. Relief operators are as important as first response operators. Coming out later and relieving someone who has been there for too many hours will make you a Godsend.

Another important way to prevent operational stress is to prepare for your response, and do so intelligently. Let's stray from the concept of the good idea of ready kits slightly, and accept the reality that many do not keep a stocked ready kit, and everyone's needs and the needs of every operation is different. Let's prepare you for your response. The first thing you need to do is ask questions. Find out where you will be, what facilities exist at that location, and what you will be doing. That will be the first step in understanding what you need. If the location has facilities that will take care of your human needs, you will not need to take food and water. This is no guarantee, however, that the status of that facility will not change. Take what you need, and in your judgment is "needed extra." Packing 200 pounds of equipment around is stressful. Remember your human needs first, then move onto equipment. Never shortchange yourself, and understand what you need to do, and what to take.

Understanding has three themes within it. First of which is understand what your role is. Unless you are an initial responder, you can usually observe the person you are replacing for a short time, ask questions and understand what you are doing. If you are the first responder being relieved by someone, please consider their inexperience at the task, and give the benefit of yours. Taking 10 minutes to do this will lower the stress level of both parties. The person relieving you will understand the task, and you will be confident that the important job you have been doing will continue being performed well.

Understanding also extends to knowing you are part of a team that is assigned to accomplish something. Understand that the person or facility you are performing communications duties for has a defined role and responsibilities. Especially understand that if you are working with government officials, that they have a legal responsibility to accomplish the goal of restoring the infrastructure of the area to as normal as possible. Whether it is a government official, a shelter manager or whoever is in charge of the facility you are at respond to and respect their responsibilities and authority. Do not hesitate to be a team member, and help educate them about the methods, and abilities, and restrictions of amateur radio. Helping them understand your job and you understanding theirs will reduce the level of stress on both sides.

If you can do a little something extra to help them, do so. However, do not let them assign you major tasks that will take you away from your communications duties. Use your judgment when saying yes or no to special requests. If the task will take only a moment, but help a good deal, by all means help if you are not busy on the radio. Your doing a little extra will pay dividends to you when you need help or understanding. Again, reducing your stress.

Another understanding to have is that disasters are high-stress environments. We as individuals react in different ways to these environments. Understand that even people you have known all their lives may act in ways that are not characteristic with their personalities. There will be reactions you don't expect, negative reactions, and downright surprising circumstances. Keep these in perspective, and navigate them carefully. 99.9% of the time it is nothing personal, it is a person responding to stress. Keep your focus on your task, and respond accordingly.

Most of all, understand the needs of the community you serving. Sometimes, you may have to answer a phone call from, or interact directly with a citizen who is in distress and needs help, or just wants to "vent." Keep your cool, and using your firm grasp of your role with the agency you are working with, offer what assistance you can to that person. Relate to them on a personal level, and if you have something in common with them use that to build a bridge. Remember the person on the other end is someone that you are serving as a representative of the facility you are working with. Sometimes just letting them tell you their problems, and relating your understanding to them will help them more than you would expect. People who are part of a disaster, including you can become frustrated with the lack of normality without knowledge they may be acting in a not so normal fashion.

Patience is a virtue, but even more so in a disaster. Remember that disasters are situation where nothing works as it normally would. Be patient when trying to complete a task, and it takes longer than normal for whatever reason. Many things will not work, routine methods may not apply, or some things may simply not be available. Consider your task as something for you to complete to the best of your ability, but some things may not be possible. If you are unable to complete an assignment after giving your 100% effort, explain that to the person that gave it to you, and the reason it is not possible.

Patience also includes understanding. If you are a coordinator of the operation, understand that volunteers need relief, and have their own particular problems to solve at home. From the volunteer viewpoint, understand that coordinators are working as hard as they can to find a warm body to take the place of yours. Sometimes it is very difficult. Please don't abandon your post unless it is absolutely necessary and always inform the manager at the site, and the amateur radio coordinator if you must do so.

One of the most forgotten concepts of avoiding operational stress is a result of the adrenalin, and sense of urgency. "Know your limits," and keep them in mind when you are working. As stated earlier, disasters are stressful environments. Know that you may encounter things you would not have expected in your wildest imagination. A healthy dose of common sense, and perspective will help you react to, and navigate these circumstances.

Very important to knowing your limits is pacing yourself. Common sense or the manager of the facility will dictate what is important. Accomplish your tasks as effectively as possible with regard to priority, and conserve your energy if possible. Sure, some operating positions are slower than others, but long hours of work can have its own consequence on you if you don't work steadily and smartly. Keep in mind that mistakes at this level can affect others, and ask to be relieved if you are beyond your limits.

Also observe your psychological limits. Remember all the strange things you see in a disaster? Deal with them with common sense, and don't be afraid to discuss them with those who may be able to help you better understand them. Also realize that working in such a situation can affect you in ways you never expected. Listen to the input of others if they are expressing that you take a break, and watch out for those around you who may be having difficulty dealing with the situation. Reach out to them, or request the manager of your facility do so

Common sense and training is your best tool in working any disaster.

Lastly, "Home and Family First." Remember that your family is going through this disaster as well, and they are supporting your efforts. Recognize that they may need you home and awake during your relief periods in a protracted operation. Initiate that contact yourself. Don't wait until they express it. Know your family's limits, and prevent them from reaching that limit.