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Managing Stress Among Mortuary and Death Care Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Behavioral Health Guidance and Resources

Mortuary and death care workers routinely come into contact with death and human remains as part of their professional roles. As a result, resiliency is built through experience, education, and peer support. However, for many working in this profession it may be uncommon to discuss or reveal their emotions and perceived stress to others. The novel stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic may have a pronounced effect on these professionals and it is important to identify ways that mortuary and death care workers can help themselves and each other.

Listed below are tips and general guidance on how to reduce negative behavioral health impacts for death care workers in a COVID-19 environment. Workers and leadership are encouraged to adapt these recommendations to meet individual needs and situational considerations.

Stressors in Mortuary Affairs during COVID-19 Pandemic

Active management of one's stress and promotion of good behavioral health is integral to long-term mortuary work. Depersonalizing the work can help reduce negative behavioral health effects of working with the deceased. Below are three major stressors and strategies:

Psychological/Emotional Identification

Emotionally identifying with decedents can negatively impact behavioral health by increasing the risk for compassion fatigue[1] and distress. Working in the COVID-19 response environment may increase these risks. Strategies for reducing psychological identification include:
- Limit autopsies when possible.
- Limit exposure to personal effects when possible.
- Identify methods to lessen exposure to the hands and face of the deceased. Stress often increases when workers are exposed to these parts of the body.
- Reach out to fellow death care workers who have military, mass casualty, or more experience in general for guidance and tips in reducing the negative behavioral and psychological impacts of emotional identification with decedents.

Personal Safety

Worry about whether a decedent is COVID-19 positive is a normal response in this pandemic. Mitigation strategies include:
- Communicate with leadership about your safety concerns and to discuss solutions for protective measures needed for you to safely do your job.
- Practice COVID-19 infection control procedures. Repeated practice with the process for handling COVID-19 positive bodies—and in the workplace and when visiting families of decedents—can

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[1] "Compassion fatigue" refers to the physical and mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal experienced by those who care for sick or traumatized people over an extended period of time.

reduce anxiety and stress (See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] information on infection control and on postmortem guidance).

Funeral Services

Constraints on group gatherings interferes with the grief process as family and loved ones may be unable to have desired funeral services. Stress, frustration, and anger by loved ones can emotionally compromise death care workers and result in compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress[2]. Strategies for reducing negative behavioral and psychological impact of these stressors include:
- Virtual funeral services are one method of allowing services without risking infection among those attending or funeral employees involved.
- If feasible, inform families that embalmed remains can be held for a period of time while loved ones and mortuary workers identify best option for each deceased person.

Stress Symptoms for Mortuary and Death Services Workers

Constant exposure to death means that stress symptoms may present differently and may be harder to identify. Stress symptoms common to death care workers are more likely to be behavioral changes, physical symptoms, and cumulative stress resulting in compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress. Symptoms may include:

- Feeling emotionally void
- Alcohol and drug misuse
- Denial

- Anxiety
- Compassion fatigue
- Quitting work

- Depression
- Mood changes
- Change in appetite

Additional Stress Reduction Strategies

Engagement in the end-of-life process can be an emotionally trying, yet rewarding, experience for many death care workers. Developing and building on existing coping strategies is imperative in a crisis that has the potential to overwhelm existing death care facilities and workers. Strategies to reduce the impact of stress include:

Peer Support and Connectedness

For local mortuary services, competition and conflict between organizations may arise. Despite potential conflict, fellow mortuary services can be useful support networks in times of crisis.
- Connect with colleagues and peers around you that you know and trust.
- Consider reaching out remotely to other individuals throughout the death care profession for support.

Individual Coping

- Record emotional impacts and thoughts (e.g., journaling, voice recording, or self-talk), as it can help with the processing of and coping with emotions.
- Engage in self-care. Refrain from unhealthy behaviors (e.g., excessive alcohol, drug use).
- Identify accessible behavioral health services (e.g., tele-behavioral health, crisis helplines, Employee Assistance Programs).

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[2] Secondary traumatic stress is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another.

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- Reflect on the importance of the role you have taken to help the families of deceased individuals.
- Remember that your work is important for the loved ones of the decedents and your community.

Strategies for Leadership

Community and healthcare leaders should understand that mortuary and death care workers may require a flexible approach to meet their behavioral health needs.

- Engage with death care workers to better understand how their work and needs have changed due to COVID-19.
- Create peer support networks; for leadership engaged with one specific profession (e.g., funeral directors), reach out to related groups to create cross-communication within the mortuary system to develop and implement support systems and stress management strategies.
- Identify death care workers with less experience and encourage gradual (i.e., rather than sudden) increase in workload and exposure to remains and personal aspects (e.g., personal effects, loved ones).
- Pair more experienced and less experienced professionals.
- Engage in open and honest communication regarding concerns and emerging protocols and guidance. Reach out to additional leadership connected to mortuary affairs to ensure consistency in communication.
- Recognize that some mortuary and death care workers may be reluctant to admit to behavioral and psychological health needs.
- Provide information on behavioral health services. Stay up to date on new behavioral health supports that may become available such as tele-behavioral health.

Additional Resources

- The Disaster Distress Helpline provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters, including COVID-19. Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746.
- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress:
  - Psychological Stress in Mortuary Affairs Operations PowerPoint[*]
  - Information for Healthcare Providers in Body Recovery from Mass Death[*]
- CDC COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions on Funerals
- U.S. Army Chapter 45 Mental Health Support to Operations Involving Death and the Dead
- Vice article Working With Dead People Has Its Own Special Kind of Job Stress[*]

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[*] This document contains links to non-federal websites. Linking to a non-federal website does not constitute an endorsement by the U.S. government, or any of its employees, of the information and/or products presented on that site.