



# Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Understanding the Effects of Trauma and Traumatic Events to Help Prevent, Mitigate and Foster Recovery for Individuals, Organizations and Communities  
A Program of Uniformed Services University, Our Nation's Federal Medical School, Bethesda, Maryland • [www.usuhs.mil/csts/](http://www.usuhs.mil/csts/)

## Hurricane Katrina: Sustaining Effectiveness in First Responders

The first-responder community is a diverse group that includes:

- Police
- Firefighters
- Search and Rescue teams
- Emergency medical personnel
- Public safety and construction workers
- Sanitation & communication experts and engineers
- Other disaster workers

First responders from these organizations must work together to help individuals in the aftermath of a disaster. This cooperation is often a community's first step towards

repair. By providing direction, protection, treatment, and security first responders help the affected population "rebuild community."

Katrina has destroyed cities, towns, and neighborhoods. Thousands of people are displaced, and must now live in crowded conditions. The recovery effort will require communities to work with local first responders, with first responders who arrive from afar, and with other agencies and communities at distant locations. All first responders bring to the relief efforts their unique training and skills. The ideas listed below will help first responders of all job-types work most effectively with each other and the communities they assist.

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- Safety and maintaining health are critical. Attention to health basics such as using only potable water, providing sanitation, adequate food and proper shelter will reduce the risk of disease and limit the spread of infection.
  - Those in need may not respond positively to offers of assistance. They may actually be wary of or fear those who are attempting to offer help. Calm and compassionate reassurance will generally be effective even if a victim's initial behavior is irrational, difficult, or seems like an "attack."
  - Populations at particular risk for problems include the mentally ill, the medically ill, the elderly, and children. Also, as immigrants may avoid or flee help for fear of deportation special effort must be made to convey the message that an approach is an offer of assistance.
  - Staying aware of each others' stress level is critical to maintaining the effectiveness of recovery and assistance efforts. Simple interventions, such as providing a rest area with cots and washing stations, fluids and food, that is protected from news media and onlookers, encouraging resting off of one's feet during breaks, watching out for over-dedication to task, and engaging persons in conversation/topics of their choosing, and praising others efforts and assistance go a long way to maintaining effectiveness.
  - In speaking with the public, reliable, repeated, accurate, and up-to-date information about safety concerns, response plans, and available resources is calming
  - First responder work involves exposure to the losses and injury of others. The responder community must monitor each other's stress level and help one another manage as they help the larger community.
  - Proper sleep, nutrition, and exercise are critical to sustaining the rebuilding effort in first responders and community members. First responders should also be aware of their own limitations and potential for injury.
  - Recreation, regular exercise, and other healthy outlets help maintain energy and alleviate stress. Excessive alcohol use detracts from efficiency on the job and may be dangerous
  - Regularly planned and scheduled communication with family members back home is important not only for the family—but for responders themselves.