

Supporting CCR&R Mental Health in Response to Emergencies

.....

Last updated in October 2024

Child Care Resource & Referrals (CCR&Rs) are 'second responders' in their roles as community organizations and social service providers and are an important community resource. There is a good chance that CCR&R staff will need to support their community in response to a natural disaster or other emergency at some point.

CCR&R staff support child care providers, families, and communities but should also have a plan to make sure their own needs are met. Extra planning may be needed during the emergency preparedness phase to support mental health during emergency response and recovery.

When you help others who have experienced trauma, it can affect your health. If an emergency happens in your community, you may experience trauma of your own.

As trusted experts, Child Care Aware® of America helps child care professionals and providers navigate the complexities of emergency preparedness, response, and recovery, ensuring they are supported every step of the way. Child care resource organizations (CCR&Rs) are vital 'second responders'—organizations that step in after first responders have addressed immediate threats during an emergency. Unlike first responders, who focus on immediate physical safety, CCR&Rs provide crucial ongoing support to child care providers, families, and communities in the aftermath of a crisis, helping them recover and rebuild. In this role, CCR&R staff may experience trauma themselves, making it essential for them to have tools and plans in place to safeguard their own mental health while they assist others.

CCAOA draws on real-world expertise and cutting-edge research to equip child care providers with the tools and knowledge they need to thrive during emergencies, fostering resilience and long-term success. By supporting child care providers in times of crisis, CCAoA plays a critical role in making America child care strong—because when child care is strong, everyone is stronger.



Mental Health During Emergency Preparation

The first step in the emergency management cycle is emergency preparedness. Emergency preparedness takes place before an emergency or disaster. Typical steps that take place during the emergency preparedness phase include creating emergency plans, practicing drills, and building emergency supply kits. These steps will help you be prepared for an emergency and can also help reduce the strain on your mental health during and after the event.

It is important to build relationships with community partners during ‘blue sky’ days to increase the likelihood that trusted partners can be called upon before, during, and after a disaster.

Ensure your CCR&R has a written emergency plan. Make sure you know the plan and what your role is. Knowing what is expected of you ahead of time can make it easier to respond and cope if an emergency arises.

While it is important to be prepared to meet physical needs during an emergency, it is also important to consider emotional needs.

The Canadian Red Cross provides [suggestions](#) on how to emotionally prepare yourself for an emergency or disaster.

- Know the risks to your emotional wellbeing. Having a preparedness mindset will help you be more ready to cope in a crisis and face the emotional impact that can naturally follow.
- Make a self-care plan for emergencies. While little may be in our control during a crisis, we can cope much better – including emotionally – by being more prepared.
 - A self-care plan might include answers to these questions:
 - How do you recognize when you are stressed?
 - How do you typically cope with stress?
 - How have you coped with stress during past emergencies?
 - How do you think you will react to a new crisis or emergency?
 - How will you monitor and manage the reactions of both you and your loved ones?
 - What kinds of supports do you have available to help protect your mental health and build your resilience to stress in challenging situations?
 - How will you unwind after a stressful experience?
 - How will you know when it is time to seek out more mental health support?
- Plan to connect to mental health support during an emergency.
 - Before an emergency:
 - Create a support network contact list to identify the people you can turn to if you experience an emergency (for example, family, friends, and neighbors). Let them know that they are your support people in case of crisis or disasters. Add your medical and mental health practitioners to this list, and your out-of-town contacts as well.
 - Research available community services in your area that help support wellbeing and decrease stress (for example, recreational facilities, health facilities, counseling centers, social programs and clubs, support groups, or community organizations).
- Have a plan to regain a sense of control after an emergency and update your plan for the future.
 - Being organized before an emergency can help us feel a sense of control.
 - Keep your emergency kit updated with medications and medical devices that you or your loved ones rely on.
 - Keep track of any physical or mental health conditions you or your loved ones are actively managing and consider how you will monitor and manage these during a crisis.
 - Think about ways you can protect meaningful items in an emergency (for example, heirlooms or items special to your family).
 - Think about how to care for pets during an emergency (for example, essential pet supplies, carriers, ID tags, emergency veterinary contacts, and pet medications).
 - Update your emergency contact list and plan how you will connect with loved ones after a crisis, especially children and older adults. Communicate clearly to ensure everyone knows what to expect in case of an emergency.
 - It can also be useful, while the experience is fresh, to think about ways you can improve your plan to be even more prepared for a possible future emergency.

Mental Health During Emergency Response and Recovery

The second phase of the emergency management cycle is emergency response. This begins when you are alerted to an impending emergency or disaster or when an emergency occurs. The third phase is emergency recovery. This is the period (hours, days, weeks, months) after an emergency occurs where returning to everyday lives is the focus.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), it is natural to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry during and after an emergency or disaster. Everyone reacts differently, and your feelings will change over time. Notice and accept how you feel. Taking care of your emotional health during an emergency will help you think clearly and react to urgent needs. Self-care during an emergency will help your long-term healing.

[Ready.gov](#) shares some things to keep in mind.

- Everyone who sees or experiences an emergency or disaster is affected by it in some way.
- It is normal to feel anxious about your own safety and that of your family and close friends.
- Profound sadness, grief and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Acknowledging your feelings helps you recover.
- Focusing on your strengths and abilities helps you heal.
- Accepting help from community programs and resources is healthy.
- Everyone has unique needs and different ways of coping.

Most people who are impacted by an emergency will experience distress. It is normal for this to happen and will improve over time for most people. Reactions may be physical, behavioral, or emotional. If you understand your reaction to a traumatic event, you may be better able to cope.

According to the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#), common reactions after an emergency or disaster may include:

- Anxiety or fear.
- Overwhelming sadness.
- Anger, especially if the event involved violence.
- Guilt, even when you had no control over the traumatic event.
- Disconnection, not caring about anything or anyone.
- Numbness, or inability to feel either joy or sadness.
- Stomachaches or diarrhea.
- Headaches or other physical pains for no apparent reason.
- Jumpiness or being easily startled.
- Trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, sleeping too much, or trouble relaxing.
- An increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels.
- Use or misuse of alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, or prescription medication in an attempt to reduce distressing feelings or forget.
- Outbursts of anger, feeling irritated and blaming others for everything.
- The desire to be alone most of the time, self-isolation.
- Trouble remembering things.
- Trouble thinking clearly or concentrating.
- Difficulty talking about what happened or listening to others talk about it.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Office of Readiness and Response states that exposure to trauma can affect a person’s normal coping and stress management skills. Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances perceived by the individual as harmful or life-threatening events. The effects of trauma are long-lasting and impact mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

An individual’s health and well-being during an emergency may be more severely impacted by:

- Direct exposure to the disaster, such as being evacuated or witnessing others (including family members) in life-threatening situations.
- Prior experience with and exposure to trauma.
- Pre-existing conditions, such as a mental health diagnosis
- Socioeconomic factors, and lack of access to resources

By addressing both the practical and emotional aspects of emergency preparedness, you and your team will be better equipped to manage the challenges during and after a disaster, ensuring resilience and long-term success.

When child care providers are prepared—both physically and emotionally—they can continue delivering essential services during crises. Together, we can ensure that child care remains a pillar of strength in times of need.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary traumatic stress, sometimes referred to as compassion fatigue can result from working with others who experience trauma firsthand. The reactions are similar to those of people with post-traumatic stress disorder (Osofsky, Putnam & Lederman, 2008; Figley, 1995).

CCR&R staff are among the professionals who may be vulnerable to secondary traumatic stress, though not all who experience a traumatic event will experience it. “It is preventable and treatable, however, if unaddressed, the symptoms can result in problems with mental and physical health, strained personal relationships, and poor work performance.” (Pryce, Shackelford & Pryce, 2007).

Secondary traumatic stress symptoms can include:

Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioral	Physical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lowered concentration • Apathy • Rigid thinking • Perfectionism • Preoccupation with trauma 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guilt • Anger • Numbness • Sadness • Helplessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal • Sleep disturbance • Appetite change • Hyper-vigilance • Elevated startle response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased heart rate • Difficulty breathing • Muscle and joint pain • Impaired immune system • Increased severity of medical concerns

From *Secondary Traumatic Stress* (Administration for Children & Families)

Secondary traumatic stress should be addressed by individuals and organizations through both prevention and treatment.

The Administration for Children & Families shares some strategies to consider.

Individual Prevention Strategies Include:

- Life balance: work to establish and maintain a diversity of interests, activities and relationships.
- Relaxation techniques: ensure downtime by practicing meditation or guided imagery.
- Contact with nature: garden or hike to remain connected to the earth and help maintain perspective about the world.
- Creative expression: things like drawing, cooking or photography expand emotional experiences.
- Assertiveness training: learn to be able to say “no” and to set limits when necessary.
- Interpersonal communication skills: improve written and verbal communication to enhance social and professional support.
- Cognitive restructuring: regularly evaluate experiences and apply problem-solving techniques to challenges.
- Time management: set priorities and remain productive and effective.
- Plan for coping: determine skills and strategies to adopt or enhance when signs of compassion fatigue begin to surface.

Individual Treatment Strategies Include:

- Focusing on self-care: making a healthy diet, exercise and regular sleep priorities reduces adverse stress effects.
- Journaling: writing about feelings related to helping or caregiving and about anything that has helped or been comforting can make meaning out of negative experiences.
- Seeking professional support: working with a counselor who specializes in trauma to process distressing symptoms and experiences provides additional perspectives and ideas.
- Joining a support group: talking through experiences and coping strategies with others who have similar circumstances can enhance optimism and hope.
- Learning new self-care strategies: adopting a new stress management technique such as yoga or progressive muscle relaxation can reduce adverse physical stress symptoms.
- Asking for help: asking social supports or co-workers to assist with tasks or responsibilities can hasten healing.
- Recognizing success and creating meaning: identifying aspects of helping that have been positive and important to others assists with resolving trauma and distress.
- Time management: set priorities and remain productive and effective.
- Plan for coping: determine skills and strategies to adopt or enhance when signs of compassion fatigue begin to surface.

Work Environments that Support Mental Health

The work environment can have a significant impact on your mental health. When someone has experienced trauma, they are at risk of re-traumatization if their workplace is not trauma informed. A trauma-informed workplace assumes each person has past and present experiences that may challenge their ability to engage with situations and people.

Following an emergency, you should be mindful about how you are handling work. Be realistic about expectations of work.

- Do you have support to help you balance your “regular job” with the emergency response?
- Are you able to find a work life balance?
- Are responsibilities shared to support people being able to break as needed?
- Do you have a physically and emotionally safe work environment?
- Do you have access to support services in the workplace?
- Is there a structure in place for staff to help support the emotional needs of the team and its’ members? A trauma-informed supportive environment is crucial for minimizing stress.
 - One evidence-based way to support behavioral health in the workplace during disaster response and recovery is to utilize a peer support buddy system (Umeda et al., 2020). In a buddy system, two or more staff are teamed together during response and recovery to watch for exposures to hazardous conditions, safety issues, and stressors. The buddy system helps staff to manage stress and prevent burnout by:
 - Helping your buddy to feel safe to express their needs and limits.
 - Encouraging each other to take care of themselves (get enough sleep, exercise, eat healthy).
 - Recognize accomplishments, even small ones, during difficult times.
 - Identify opportunities and encouraging participation in stress relief activities.
 - Acknowledging feelings of burnout and its impact.
 - Talking with each other about your disaster response and recovery experiences.

Sharing experiences has a team-building effect and helps prevent psychological problems in and out of the workplace. Reactions that are not addressed and processed might lead to an ineffective unhealthy workplace with disgruntled staff suffering from burnout, compassion fatigue (secondary traumatic stress), or other behavioral health issues. A supportive environment where it is not only allowed but encouraged to talk about emotional reactions and limitations will ensure the quality and effectiveness of activities and responders’ well-being. Consider the following ideas for creating a supportive work environment.

- Adopt policies that promote and support staff self-care.
- Have an open and sharing organizational culture.
- Schedule regular and frequent staff meetings.
- Show respect for confidentiality.
- Require staff to complete training in Psychological First Aid (PFA).
 - Psychological First Aid is an evidence-informed intervention to address basic needs and reduce psychological distress by providing a caring comforting presence, and education on common stress reactions.
- Establish a buddy system to support your day-to-day work emotional needs.
- Have fun together!

Coping with Stress

SAMHSA has a disaster distress helpline that provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. Keep the phone number in a place where you can easily locate it if you need it. Call or text: 1-800-985-5990.

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides a free, confidential 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis response hotline for getting help for yourself or someone else that you are worried may need crisis support.

Call or text [988](tel:988) or chat 988lifeline.org

SAMHSA also offers [tips](#) to help cope with traumatic events such as emergencies or disasters.

- Limit your consumption of news. Reduce the amount of news you watch and/or listen to and engage in relaxing activities to help you heal and move on.
- Get enough “good” sleep. Practice good habits such as avoiding using cell phones or drinking caffeine right before going to bed.
- Establish and maintain a routine. Include a positive or fun activity in your schedule that you can look forward to each day or week. Schedule exercise into your daily routine as well, if possible.
- Avoid making major life decisions. Big changes can be stressful and are even harder to adjust to after a disaster.
- Understand there will be changes. Disasters can destroy familiar places and disrupt the lives of people living in affected areas. People may lose loved ones or experience injuries.

Reach out for mental health support and services in your community. The stress reactions experienced while adapting to a crisis might last for some time. If your reactions persist and make it impossible to function normally over a long period of time, seek help. Remember that asking for help is a sign of strength. Adapting to a crisis can bring challenges, but with the right support systems in place, individuals can recover and regain stability over time.

CCR&Rs are a constant source of resilience and strength within their communities, playing a vital role in supporting child care providers, children and families every day. By being prepared both physically and emotionally, you can continue delivering essential services, even in the face of emergencies. It is important to prioritize your own well-being and take advantage of the resources and networks available to help you navigate challenges. Together, we can ensure that child care remains a pillar of stability and support for families across the country.

Resources

- [Caring for Ourselves as We Care for Others | ECLKC \(hhs.gov\)](#)
- [Coping with Disaster | Ready.gov](#)
- [Coping with a Disaster or Traumatic Event \(cdc.gov\)](#)
- [Disaster Distress Helpline: Get Immediate Crisis Counseling and Support | SAMHSA](#)
- [Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery | SAMHSA](#)
- [PFA: Basic Relaxation Techniques | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(nctsn.org\)](#)
- [Psychological First Aid Field Operations Guide \(va.gov\)](#)
- [Secondary Traumatic Stress \(Administration for Children & Families\)](#)
- [Secondary Traumatic Stress \(The National Child Traumatic Stress Network\)](#)
- [Tips for Disaster Responders: Understanding Compassion Fatigue](#)
- [Tips for Disaster Responders: Preventing and Managing Stress](#)

Online Training

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) Training – you will need to develop an account to register for NCTSN trainings.
 - [Secondary Traumatic Stress: Understanding the Impact on Professionals in Trauma-Exposed Workplaces \(nctsn.org\)](#)
- TRAIN is a national learning network that provides quality training opportunities for professionals who protect and improve the public’s health and safety. You will have to develop an account to register but there are many other free training courses on this learning platform that might also be of interest.
 - [Addressing Disaster and Emergency Stress Beyond First Responders: Implications for Individuals, Families, and the Workplace](#)
 - [Building Workforce Resilience through the Practice of Psychological First Aid: A Course for Leaders and Teams](#)
 - [Individual and Community Preparedness](#)
 - [IS-36.A: Preparedness for Child Care Providers](#)
 - [Psychological First Aid: A Minnesota Community Supported Model](#)
 - [Trauma Informed Care: Introduction to Minnesota Trauma-Informed Emergency Response and Recovery \(MnTIER\)](#)

Mobile Apps

- [FEMA App](#) – The free app is your personalized disaster resource, so you feel empowered and ready to take charge of any disaster life throws your way.
- [Psychological First Aid Tutorial App](#) – Developed by the University of MN and the MN Department of Health the app includes practice scenarios that provide valuable opportunities to check individuals’ readiness and understanding of Psychological First Aid and self-care actions for responders before, during, and after an emergency event.
- [Red Cross First Aid App](#) – This free app gives instant access to information on how to handle the most common first aid situations, taking critical first aid information normally stored on bookshelves and in pamphlets and places it at the fingertips of millions of individuals – in order to help save lives.

- [Red Cross Pet First Aid App](#) – With the free Pet First Aid app it’s easy to learn what to do if an emergency affects your pet. It provides access to expert guidance on how to maintain your pet’s health, what to do in emergencies, and how to include pets in your emergency preparedness plans.
- [SAMHSA Disaster Mobile App](#) – The free app offers responders immediate access for any type of traumatic event at every phase of response, including pre-deployment preparation, on-the-ground assistance, and post-deployment resources.
- [The First Responder Toolkit](#) – This free app is a collaboration between the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Health helps first and secondary responders manage the emotional and physical exhaustion of their work that can lead to personal burnout, reduced feelings of empathy, and poorer job performance.