


Chapter 3

Prevention Strategies of Emergency Management and Disaster Professionals Battling Burnout

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ABSTRACT

Burnout in the world of public services, particularly in emergency and disaster management, can be a paradox. Two standard modes of operations often exist, including steady state (blue sky) operations of prevention and planning activities amid conflicting priorities and politizing events and the activation (grey sky) operations of responding to incidents, disasters, and crises. These two high-stress modes of operation, coupled with added pressure from leadership and resource limitations, increase undue stress in a first responder environment without the protections and resources afforded most first responders. This chapter will review and discuss the background and causal impacts of burnout in emergency and disaster management, provide recommendations and strategies for prevention and recovery and evidence-based practices, and leave you with additional considerations for your jurisdiction, policies, and/or practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Burnout within the public sector is an important issue that impacts the functions of public services and the continuity of community work. The effects of personal and community circumstances are often stressed and reflected during natural and human-caused disasters such as hurricanes and cyber-attacks, which heavily influence burnout. This issue is further compounded by public sector workers being exposed to high-stress environments when directly or indirectly responding to an incident, including workers in fire, law enforcement, and the hub of operations and planning, “Emergency Management.” Emergency management evolved from Civil defense in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks and now serves as a critical cornerstone of community resilience and sustainability within an American context. This chapter will explore the background of emergency management and disaster services, the standard effects practitioners experience working through various incidents without immediate access to their families, and the influence such exposure and limited support have on burnout levels as emergency management and disaster service workers support the larger community’s efforts to establish a ‘new normal’ after the incident. More specifically, exposure to high-stress situations often impacts thousands, if not millions, of lives at the intersection of professional advancement and mental health. Encouraging working through stress without proper care, addressing the core challenges, and allowing enough recovery time from planned and unplanned events is commonplace within the professional emergency and disaster service field. The nature of emergency and disaster service work in the public sector is community-oriented, which translates to professionals often prioritizing the needs of the community and response efforts over their individual needs as responders. These two methods of ‘profession first, professional second’ negatively influence burnout. This was reflected by the mass exodus of professionals during and after the COVID-19 pandemic globally. The issue was highlighted by the Domestic Preparedness Journal (DomPrep) written by Dr. Kesley Richardson, sponsored by the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM), and later mentioned by Sonny Patel, Kim Guevara, and other in the Journal of Emergency Management (JEM) at the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) 2023 International Convention in Long Beach, CA (Richardson, 2022 & Patel, S. S., Guevara, K., Hollar, T. L., Richard A. DeVito, J., & Erickson, T. B. 2023). . These examples highlight the importance of preventing burnout within the public sector of emergency management and disaster services. However, imbalanced prioritizing and exposure to high-stress environments are not the only issues this profession faces.

An additional issue within the emergency management and disaster service space is that the public sector professionals working within this space often have differing job protection statuses and health resources with varying benefits asso-

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