



Returning Home From a Disaster Assignment

Providing urgently needed services to individuals and communities recovering from a disaster can be a rewarding and challenging experience. Contributing to the success of the Red Cross mission under difficult conditions can create a satisfying sense of personal accomplishment. The camaraderie of working on a team and establishing new friendships can be very gratifying. However, family, friends, and co-workers may have difficulty fully understanding or appreciating your experiences on a disaster operation. After returning home, the impact of your specific experiences—combined with physical and emotional fatigue—may result in some challenges, for both you and the important people in your life.

Possible Reactions

Everyone reacts differently following a disaster assignment. Most reactions are considered normal and are temporary. For some workers, disasters bring forth strong thoughts and emotions, both positive and negative. Other workers may experience mild reactions, or hardly any reaction at all. Anticipating the following possible reactions can help you successfully navigate your transition home. As you prepare to return, consider that you may experience:

- ▶ A deep connection to the pain of the disaster survivors
- ▶ Bothersome memories of things you saw, heard and smelled
- ▶ Difficulty sleeping, change in appetite or distractibility
- ▶ Feelings of exhaustion
- ▶ Dissatisfaction with some aspects of the operation
- ▶ Frustration that family members have saved work or “projects” for you
- ▶ Difficulty downshifting from the fast pace of disaster work
- ▶ Less interest in normal activities and spending time with people
- ▶ A yearning to return to the disaster operation to help the survivors or regain the sense of camaraderie
- ▶ A strong sense of shared purpose from an important mission
- ▶ Satisfaction with having seen the best side of humanity emerge in the face of disaster
- ▶ Feelings of pride and joy in your accomplishments and personal growth

These are just some of the reactions that are common and expected after returning home from a disaster. Negative reactions usually resolve over the course of days or weeks.



Building Resilience

Your unique reactions to your disaster assignment can present some challenges as you transition home. The good news is that people have resilience—the ability to bounce back after difficult times. Below are some strategies that may help you build your resilience as you transition home.

- ▶ **Rest and Take Time to Recover.** Given that you most likely worked long, hard hours, let your family and co-workers know that you will need extra time to rest. Mentioning this need while you are still on the operation and preparing to return may be helpful. Remember that returning to work the day after you return from an assignment is not advisable.
- ▶ **Focus on Your Accomplishments.** Congratulate yourself for a job well done! Reflect on what you have learned, the challenges that you met, and the service that you gave. Even if you left an operation before it was completed, you still served as an important part of accomplishing the mission of the Red Cross team.
- ▶ **Maintain a Hopeful Outlook.** Remind yourself that your assisting with the emergency needs of survivors helped them along their path toward recovery. Destruction and despair may have been present in the moment, but so also was the spark of hope—that human thread that connects us all. Many people were helped, and progress was made.
- ▶ **Use Calming Strategies.** Consider the usual strategies you use to relax or calm yourself. For

example, some people enjoy having a good laugh, watching some TV, visiting with friends, working on hobbies, or exercising. Slowing down and taking a few deep breaths can be calming. Noticing if any of your muscles are tight, then stretching and relaxing them can be helpful. Finally, listen to your thoughts. If you find yourself having intense thoughts or memories that are bothersome, allow yourself to let them go. Direct your focus more toward the positive aspects of your deployment and your life at home.

- ▶ **Engage in Self-care.** Taking care of you is the main foundation of resilience. Eat healthy foods, drink plenty of water, exercise regularly and catch up on your sleep. Avoid engaging in drug or alcohol abuse. Instead, create opportunities to do those things that are likely to help you replenish your emotional and physical reserves.
- ▶ **Watch for Training Opportunities.** Feeling confident about your disaster work skills can contribute to your sense of strength and resilience. During deployments many disaster workers become aware of other skills that could assist them during deployments. Consider looking into Red Cross training courses that could help you broaden your skills.
- ▶ **Stay Connected.** Feeling connected with others is an essential component of resilience. Talking and spending time with family, friends and co-workers will help you reintegrate back into your life as usual. Doing so will also remind you of the love and caring that you share.

Sharing and Reconnecting

You will most likely have many stories you would like to share with family members and co-workers. They may be eager to tell you about their experiences while you were gone as well. Communicating is very important, but there are also some unique challenges after deployment. After some relief operations, it may be difficult not to take the pain of others home with you. Be aware that your family may not understand that or be comfortable with you shar-

ing that pain or other upsetting aspects of the disaster. Remember also to be a caring listener as your family and friends catch you up on what has been happening in their lives during your absence. Compared to what you have seen and done during deployment, their experiences may not seem so significant. For example, they may share frustrations over stresses such as the washer overflowing, the kids throwing up, the dog running away, or going through a surprise audit. Such experiences are as important to them as your experiences are to you. Although your family may be supportive of your Red Cross work, they may be upset that it created a hardship for them, and they may have been concerned about your safety. Taken all together, you can see that extra special effort is needed to communicate successfully when you return home. Plan to listen well and be sensitive to one another's needs; this will help your homecoming go more smoothly.

Helping Children Cope

Your children can have a hard time understanding why you needed to be away from them for what may have seemed to them to be forever. They also may have been worried about your safety. When you return home, let them know how glad you are to be back and how much you missed them. Take special care that you do not frighten them with some of the stories about what you have seen and done. Share factual information about the disaster, including the happier stories about helping people. Involving children in family preparedness efforts can help children feel more connected with what you have been doing, as well as reduce their fears about handling such a disaster should it happen at home. On the other hand, children—especially young ones—may show little interest in your deployment, and be more demanding of your time and attention. Be sensitive to their needs as they arise. Keep in mind that your transition home from a disaster assignment is a transition for the whole family.

You are our most valuable resource. The Red Cross could not accomplish its disaster mission without your gifts of time and compassion. Thank you!

For Further Assistance

Most disaster workers experience a smooth transition when they return home after deployment. However, sometimes workers find themselves still struggling with unpleasant thoughts or feelings after several weeks. If you have any worrisome reactions, or any that last for an extended period, please contact your local chapter and ask to talk to an experienced disaster worker or a Disaster Mental Health worker. They will understand what you are experiencing and can provide you with support. In fact, checking in with your chapter when you return from a deployment to give them an update and share your experience can provide benefit for both you and your chapter.

Your participation in disaster relief operations is very important to the entire Red Cross organization. We would like to do everything possible to promote a rewarding and enriching experience for you. Thank you for your efforts, and the sacrifices you make to help those in need.