

Helping the Oil and Gas Industry Cope With Disaster: Preparing Social Workers Globally

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- The world is becoming more aware of the risk for disaster at oil refineries, chemical plants, and major gas pipelines. The growing concern is fueled by international political unrest, the harsh realities of the war in Iraq, and increasing violent acts of terrorism.
- In addition, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes are becoming more frequent, resulting in heavy material damage and often in the loss of human lives.

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- When Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast of the United States near New Orleans, Louisiana on August 29, 2005, more than 1,800 people lost their lives.
- Of the approximately 20 oil refineries and gas production facilities along the Gulf Coast, Hurricane Katrina temporarily closed 9 refineries and shut down 2 completely. Gas processing facilities were heavily damaged.

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- Three weeks later, on September 24, 2005, Hurricane Rita made landfall along the Gulf Coast near the Louisiana-Texas state border while the region was still reeling from Hurricane Katrina.
- Large scale evacuations

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With 3,600 energy-related companies, Houston is the center of the energy industry in the United States. Includes 600 exploration and production firms and 170 pipeline companies.

- Houston is also a world leader in the chemical industry with 40 percent of the U.S.'s capacity for producing basic chemicals.
- 405 chemical plants in Houston area.
- 149 oil refineries in the United States

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- On any given day, there are hundreds of thousands of individuals who work globally in the oil and gas industry to help produce energy products for the everyday consumer.
- Various companies currently are deploying workers to countries engaged in armed conflict or experiencing violent internal turmoil.

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- The physical safety and emotional well-being of all workers across the globe is a top priority for most responsible companies in this high risk industry.
- However, many employees already experience traumatic stress from unexpected fatal or serious critical incidents in the workplace.

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- **Ex. Of Workplace Critical Incidents:**
- Industrial accidents resulting in death or emergency hospitalization
- Heart attacks
- Suicides/homicides/violence in the workplace
- Explosions/Fires
- Gas/Toxic Chemical leaks
- Employee kidnappings
- Helicopter/barge/offshore platform fatalities
- Sabotage by discontented locals

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- In each of these incidents, many workers, including all levels of management, may suffer from traumatic stress due to the impact of the critical incident and the uncertainty of the final outcome.

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■ Common Symptoms of Traumatic Stress:

- Insomnia or changes in sleep patterns
- Flashbacks or intrusive images
- Changes in appetite
- Increased startle reflex and hypervigilance
- Fatigue for no apparent reason
- Confusion in thinking or decision-making
- Poor concentration/forgetfulness
- Anger
- Increased alcohol consumption/tobacco use

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- Many times, a critical incident will trigger previously experienced feelings of loss or depression that had not been dealt with at that time in an effort to “move on.”
- One of the most important factors that determines how affected all of the individuals may be is how we respond to help them.

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- Many companies contract with Employee Assistance Program (EAP) businesses to provide counseling services to all employees.
- As part of the EAP services, disaster response and disaster mental health services are provided by trained professionals following a workplace tragedy. Sometimes, these professionals are licensed clinical social workers.

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- EAP also does not exist in many countries so thousands of workers and affected family members must rely on their own ability to find local community resources who provide disaster mental health services.

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- Even if EAP services are available to employees in the company's home country, crisis intervention and disaster mental health services are seldom routinely offered to their local workforce at their global job sites.
- E.g. Halliburton – contract workers

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- However, some EAP companies use a “cookie cutter” approach to responding to disaster within the oil and gas industry which often results in many affected workers not getting the professional help they need.
- Many EAP’s appear to assume there is little difference in business industries and routinely conduct Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), a proven crisis intervention system that mitigates trauma and helps prevent Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

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- More importantly, there is a massive void of a uniform protocol and procedure so that all disaster responders may understand:
- Good critical incident response entails facilitation of natural expressions of resiliency – **not based on a rigid intervention formula**

Uniform Training Continued

- The best predictor of an individual's potential to recover is pre-morbid function/disposition **not the intensity or duration of an event.**
- Learning the workplace culture and environmental risks to consistently and effectively meet the needs of the oil and gas industry and the communities in which its facilities exist

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- Social Workers have the ideal educational background to incorporate with specialized training in trauma and disaster mental health to help impacted workers.
- Trained local social workers who most likely share the same language, cultural norms and beliefs, and are knowledgeable of the local community resources are vital.

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- There is inconsistency from disaster responders regarding:
 - what kind of intervention services are needed
 - how long they should be implemented
 - to whom they should be provided
 - whether any follow up or extension of services is warranted

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- The emotional and behavioral well-being of these persons eventually reflects the well-being of the community in which they live.
- For more information, questions, or comments-
- email: eth_safety@sbcglobal.net