

Compassion Satisfaction Buffers Burn Out in Haiti

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WASHINGTON (NNS) -- Immediately upon arrival off Haiti Jan. 15, the medical team aboard USNS Comfort (T-AH 20) began around-the-clock surgical procedures and a host of other medical care for the victims of the earthquake that killed more than 230,000 people.

While the crew settled in for sustained operations caring for the people of Haiti, ship leadership worked to ensure that operational stress controls were put into place to take care of the medical team who would see much tragedy while providing needed medical services to Haitians affected by the earthquake.

"People getting burned out is the greatest issue," said Navy Capt. Paul S. Hammer, director, Naval Center for Combat and Operational Stress Control.

Possessing the most robust medical capabilities in the region, Comfort's medical personnel and crew saw the most challenging cases from the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that devastated the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, but Hammer suggests that the stress involved in disaster relief operations is different than what military personnel would experience in combat operations.

"A humanitarian assistance mission will not have quite the post traumatic stress disorder mark, unless maybe the person has family there," Hammer said. "A humanitarian assistance mission is very rewarding, constructive, and a great thing to do."

Hammer was quick to emphasize that while humanitarian assistance missions have great rewards, leadership must be attuned to mitigate the stress that can manifest itself. While separated from family, emotional stress, physical stress, and the day-to-day stress of an overwhelming mission make up operational stress on any deployment.

"Compassion satisfaction buffers compassion fatigue and burn out," said Navy Capt. Richard Westphal, Mental Health Wellness Programs coordinator, Deployment Health, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. "They know they are helping people, they can see it on their faces. It is helping them as well."

To avoid burn out, the staff and crew are working hard to take care of one another while ensuring mission completion.

Navy Surgeon General Vice Adm. Adam M. Robinson spoke to the crew of the Comfort the night before the ship deployed Jan. 15, and advised them on some of the stresses they may experience.

"Operational and humanitarian missions - like Haiti - have many identifiable stressors ranging from daily hassles to extreme trauma," said Robinson. "If you feel overwhelmed and feel the need to talk, please don't hesitate to do that. There is no shame in raising your hand and taking a timeout. There is no shame in asking for help."

According to Hammer, leadership and leadership teams should perform the five core functions of Combat and Operational Stress Control (COSC) - strengthen, identify, mitigate, treat, and reintegrate.

"These are essential for the prevention, identification, and care of staff to prevent adverse stress outcomes across the combat and operational stress continuum," said Hammer. "Sleep, hydration, rotating shifts, and nutrition, are also important in mitigating operational stress."

For more information about the Naval Center for Combat and Operational Stress Control, visit <http://www.nccosc.navy.mil>.

For more news from Operation Unified Response visit www.navy.mil/haiti.

For more news from Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, visit <http://www.navy.mil/local/mednews/>.