



*Maintaining your sanity—taking care of yourself—in the face of emergencies at work is key to getting through such events.*

## Embracing the Personal

Developing a self-care plan is a critical part of disaster training.

By Seema Rao

When I first started in the museum field, I remember sitting in a mandatory egress training session to learn how to evacuate students from galleries during an emergency. During the training, a gruff, though

kind, security guard told the room full of artists and art historians, “You will be in charge of the safety of the visitors. You need to focus on them. Make sure they get out safely without running into the art.”

His call to arms was meant to inspire his motley crew of trainees, but rather than feeling empowered, I felt nervous. I hadn’t signed up to work in security, and I hadn’t ever thought of my role as a delegate of institutional authority.

Every museum staff member has their part to play during and after an emergency, and some people will step into roles of authority that they do not have during normal operations. And even though museum employees frequently participate in training courses to prepare them for a variety

of potential catastrophes, intellectual knowledge can feel inadequate in the event of an actual disaster.

Maintaining your sanity—taking care of yourself—in the face of emergencies at work is key to getting through such events. Following are four self-care tips that can help.

### 1. Acknowledge your role.

The first step in self-care is coming to terms with your responsibility in an emergency. This is akin to when you are sitting in an exit row and a flight attendant asks if you are willing to assist in the event of an emergency. Like that moment, you need to acknowledge that you will have some role to play in a catastrophe. Once you do that, everything is a bit easier.

### 2. Develop a personal plan.

After my formative training moment, I remember focusing on my car keys. At the time I was a gallery teacher, and like most women, I left my purse at my desk. I kept imagining myself standing in the shadow of the museum with 20 first-graders while my car keys were stuck in a fiery disaster.

While I've never lived through such a disaster, coming up with a plan helped me get over that mental hurdle. I decided to keep an extra pair of keys where my father could find them. In an emergency, I knew my dad would retrieve me.

Imagination can be one of your best self-care tools. Mental role-play can help you feel prepared to function in an emergency. Think

## After the Disaster

**Catastrophes often arrive without—or with very little—warning. Here's how to deal with the trauma of being surprised by an emergency.**

- Use the experience to plan for any future emergency, and put your plan in writing.
- Talk to colleagues who went through the disaster with you. They will have insight born of shared struggles.
- Journal about your feelings. Honestly investigate the emotions associated with living through this challenge, including feelings of fear and loss.
- Most important, give yourself time to work through your feelings. You might be feeling fine, and then in quiet moments, like when you are alone in the car, you might be overwhelmed by sadness.
- In the case of large natural disasters, your whole community will be feeling the same stress. Bring your kindest self to all of your experiences. With kindness, your whole community will be able to move forward.
- Finally, if you find that your negative feelings persist, look for professional help. Your human resources staff might have a useful list of professionals to contact.

through what your role would be in a catastrophe. Where would you need to go? Who would you be with? Make something that feels uncertain into something concrete. (If you feel you haven't had adequate training, talk to your supervisor. Searching the internet for resources might result in misinformation.)

Then, write down your plan. The simple act of writing out your steps is a way to manifest your volition in the face of uncertainty. Make this plan as specific as you want. For some people, the plan will only be a few lines; others might want to sketch a map.

### 3. Share your personal preparation plans with co-workers.

The best museum preparedness plans require collaboration and coordination. Your organization likely has formal documents and training to help staff understand evacuation and preparedness procedures. Without impeding those elements, talking to colleagues can help you feel more comfortable with your role in a potential disaster.

Consider sharing your personal plans with your fellow staff members—but only if doing so will not stress out your co-workers. However, showing colleagues your humanity will create bonds that will serve you well if you end up facing a disaster together.

Also, think about the potentially increased workload that some of your co-workers will face in times of stress. For example, marketing and social



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media staff might be logging many more hours than usual at such times. Be sure to offer them your support. (In turn, you will find that your compassion can help you step away from your own stress.)

#### 4. Focus on your emotional response.

Creating and sharing your plan can help you feel prepared for any eventuality. However, these are basically procedural preparations. So much of disaster preparedness requires emotional strength. You might need to find a way to be at your most professional while simultaneously dealing with extenuating circumstances.

Try this exercise to design your emotional approach to disaster: go back to your original disaster scenarios, and instead of focusing on what you would do, think about how you would feel. Be honest with yourself. For example, in my original scenario,

I remember thinking that I would be sad to ruin my high-heeled shoes. No emotion is wrong.

If you really don't know how you would feel, you might consider reading about how others felt in those situations. However, for some people, reading such accounts will be too emotional. Gauge your responses and do what feels comfortable.

Once you can comfortably characterize your possible emotions in a disaster, focus specifically on your fears. Name them and write them down. Some of the fears will be easy to face. You might be scared that you will not be able to perform professionally under pressure. Your planning will help you rise to the occasion. Other fears, truthfully, will be more challenging. You might fear losing your life, which is a real fear anyone facing disaster has. Being honest about this fear will not make it go away, but it will allow

you to move forward constructively.

Finally, imagine yourself going through different disaster scenarios as a calm, competent person. (But imagine yourself in the actual role you play in your organization. Don't entertain undue hero scenarios.)

Museums are some of the safest spaces to be during a disaster. Your museum will have a solid preparedness plan focused on caring for collections, staff, and visitors. However, you might still feel uncertain or stressed. With careful planning, community building, and emotional investigation, you can feel able to handle any situation, however bad.

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