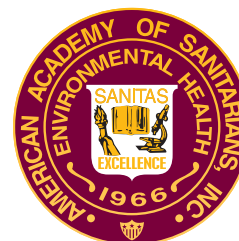


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American Academy of Sanitarians

Building Workforce Resilience: Strategies for Thriving in Uncertain Times

Editor's Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has teamed up with the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. AAS is an organization that “elevates the standards, improves the practice, advances the professional proficiency, and promotes the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” Membership with AAS is based on meeting certain high standards and criteria, and AAS members represent a prestigious list of environmental health professionals from across the country.

Through the column, information from different AAS members who are subject-matter experts with knowledge and experience in a multitude of environmental health topics will be presented to the *Journal's* readership. The conclusions and opinions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

Over the past decade, the environmental public health workforce in the U.S. has faced numerous complex challenges, including budget cuts, reduction of staff, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and ongoing disruptions due to emerging and reemerging threats. The American Psychological Association (2025) found that 77% of U.S. workers experienced work-related stress in the past month, with 57% reporting negative health effects.

Further challenges were identified in a study by Dine et al. (2024), which notes that elements of field-based employment expose environmental health inspectors to random

risks, including real and threatened physical conflict. In 2020, as part of an environmental health workforce needs assessment during the COVID-19 response, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA, 2020) reported that environmental health practitioners were emotionally exhausted and understaffed. Further, the 2024 Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS) found that although the majority of public health workers expressed satisfaction with their roles, many employees cited heavy workloads and ongoing stress as key factors contributing to their decisions to leave (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2024).

In light of the prevailing challenges facing the environmental health workforce, professionals need to develop the ability to adapt, stay productive under pressure, and maintain commitment to their purpose, even when there is a sense of unpredictability about future directions. Developing this adaptability is crucial for personal growth and well-being, staying engaged in your work, and uncovering innovative solutions to guide you through tough times. Without cultivating such flexibility, you might be more vulnerable to burnout and disengagement.

Building personal strength and durability goes beyond simply surviving difficult times—it is about thriving despite adversity. By following a few key steps, you can be better prepared to navigate uncertainties and respond with elasticity and self-reliance to whatever comes your way.

Understand Personal Resilience

Personal resilience refers to an individual's ability to adapt, thrive, and maintain a sense of well-being in the face of challenges. It is more than just recovering from setbacks—it involves staying focused, solving problems, and maintaining a positive outlook even under stress. In the demanding field of environmental health, this ability means having the emotional intelligence to manage stress, self-regulate emotions, and stay motivated. Techniques for personal resilience include pausing before reacting to prevent impulsive decisions, practicing stress management techniques (e.g., exercise or yoga to stay calm under pressure), and developing healthy coping mechanisms (e.g., talking to a friend, journaling, practicing relaxation exercises).

If you develop these skills, you can be better equipped to cope with the pressures of your role, adapt to changes, and continue contributing meaningfully to your work.

Foster a Culture of Support and Open Communication

Open communication with superiors and colleagues is one way to address and work through professional challenges. It is beneficial for you as an employee to feel heard and valued. Consider initiating regular check-ins with your managers or colleagues to provide an opportunity to share feedback, concerns, and ideas. By being transparent about challenges you face—both professional and personal—you can create an open dialogue that can help manage stress and identify solutions more effectively. Additionally, seeking out an open-door policy with supervisors allows for easier communication, ensuring that any concerns are managed promptly.

Further, focus on cultivating meaningful connections with coworkers to create supportive partnerships and allies. You can achieve this cultivation with routine meetings, casual chats, and the celebration of successes. These activities can promote a positive workplace atmosphere, encourage teamwork, and strengthen professional relationships. By taking these actions, you can foster an environment where you feel supported, engaged, and better equipped to manage challenges.

Invest in Your Well-Being

It is important to advocate for your well-being and find ways to stay calm when work or life becomes overwhelming. Taking care of yourself—physically and mentally—is essential for your overall quality of life. Music, yoga, meditation, and even short walks can calm your mind, while sports, workouts, stretches, and other physical activities can invigorate your body.

Wellness practices, including stress management workshops or seeking professional counseling, encourage self-care and support you in staying balanced and focused. If you find your workload is causing stress, consider being flexible in managing your time, such as adjusting your schedule or finding a balance between work and personal life. When you take steps to support your life balance, you

become more resilient and better equipped to thrive both personally and professionally.

Seek Out Opportunities for Skill Development

Engaging in personal development is a powerful way to foster adaptability and growth. When you focus on upskilling or reskilling, you empower yourself and feel more capable of handling new challenges. Continuous learning helps you stay current with emerging trends or technologies, making you more adaptable.

By seeking out training programs, workshops, or mentorship opportunities, you can expand your skill set, become more flexible, and gain the confidence to tackle new tasks. Embracing a mindset of ongoing learning not only keeps you motivated and engaged but also prepares you to navigate uncertainties and challenges. New expertise and a broad focus can ultimately lead to career satisfaction and long-term personal success.

Cultivate a Sense of Purpose and Connection

Having a clear sense of purpose is essential for staying motivated, especially during difficult times. When you understand how your personal goals align with your values, it becomes easier to remain focused on long-term objectives. Connecting your daily tasks to a bigger picture helps foster a deeper sense of meaning and strengthens your emotional investment in your work.

This sense of purpose not only drives motivation but also helps you persevere through setbacks and adapt to changes. By recognizing how your role in environmental health contributes to your personal growth or the well-being of others, you can find greater fulfillment in your career, making it easier to stay committed and motivated even when facing uncertainty. Practical steps include regularly reflecting on your values, setting personal goals, and finding ways to connect your tasks to your broader sense of purpose.

Pivot for a Bright Future

If your job is at risk of being eliminated, there are several key steps you can take to move forward. Start by creating a list that highlights your achievements, skills, and experience from your current job. Use this information to update your resume and your

social media accounts. Next, reach out to former colleagues, mentors, and professional contacts to inform them of your situation and seek advice, job leads, or connections to potential opportunities. It is also helpful to seek support from a career coach or use job search services and consider exploring unemployment benefits or other support programs available to you.

It is equally valuable to have a “what if” plan—knowing how you might pivot if the worst situation becomes reality. Stay connected with others in your profession. NEHA provides many ways to do so. Use your time to focus on professional development by upgrading your skills, earning certifications, or taking online courses to make yourself more marketable to future employers. Becoming involved, writing, and volunteering are important to your career as they help build valuable skills, expand your professional network, and demonstrate initiative, all of which can not only fill a void but also enhance career growth and opportunities.

Lastly, maintain a positive mindset throughout the process to stay motivated and energized as you navigate your job search. Life sometimes is uncertain. History has, however, shown us that environmental health opportunities abound.

Environmental health is a valuable and rewarding career, and you are important to the profession. Whatever the challenge, NEHA and the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) are poised to help support you and the profession as we move forward toward sustainable solutions for a strong and durable environmental health workforce. 🌸

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Corresponding Author: American Academy of Sanitarians, <https://sanitarians.org>. Email: aasanitarians@gmail.com

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also provides forms, protocols, and other resources for public health officials and aquatics staff using MAHC recommendations or otherwise working to strengthen their aquatic health and safety programs. Some of these resources are editable documents, allowing users to customize them to meet their specific needs.

The MAHC and its tools can help your program prevent injury and illness linked to aquatic venues open to the public. 🌸

Corresponding Author: Jasen Kunz, MPH, REHS/RS, Healthy Water Lead, National Center for Emerging Zoonotic and Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1600 Clifton Road NE, Atlanta, GA 30329. Email: izk0@cdc.gov

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