

# DISASTER PSYCH

## Psychological First Aid



# Emotional Phases of a Disaster

Difficult immediate aftermath - - - to the long road ahead to recovery

PRE-DISASTER: Warning? Unpredictable future?

IMPACT: confusion; family survival

HEROIC: at the beginning, volunteers may come in droves

HONEYMOON: community bonding, optimism

DISILLUSIONMENT: as time goes on, services reduce, must face some harsh realities

RECONSTRUCTION: face readjustments & continue to grieve losses

**Help survivors focus on specific  
manageable feelings and goals**

# CERT DISASTER PSYCH

Not 'therapy'- it is an intervention during field operations

Our role- stabilize individuals by promoting emotional balance

- ✓ Address medical needs
- ✓ Support doesn't mean fixing the problem or the person
- ✓ Facilitate resilience, help others to cope



## **Psychological First Aid** - evidence-based approach to assess needs, effective steps

**OBSERVE**: Pay attention to physical cues, words.

All are overwhelmed. Adapt your approach

**PROTECT**: Reassurance- not alone in their reactions

- Describe what is being done to keep everyone safe
- Privacy

**CONNECT**: Natural supports, professional resources

Provide information honestly

## **OBSERVE/ LISTEN**

- Assess age group, needs
- Seek permission from parent/ adult 1<sup>st</sup>
- Simplify intro to unaccompanied child. Eye level

## **PROTECT/ COMFORT**

- Physical contact
- Something to hold. Or do
- Shelter from harsh sights
- Provide accurate, age-appropriate info

## **CONNECT**

- Resources: child care area, faith group, etc.
- Keep records!

**CHILDREN**





## Self Care Beforehand:

- Recognize your **strengths**
- **Frankly** look for traits in yourself that concern you in others
- **Give yourself permission to fail.** Be gentler with yourself.
- What are your **stress triggers/landmines**, & stress relievers?
- **Allow yourself to receive** as well as give
- Use **spiritual resources**

- **Sanity now**- **Be able to say no:** Where do I want to invest my time, myself?  
What will give me more energy than it'll take away
- **Vicarious trauma**= identifying too strongly with a survivor- a common challenge
  - **Circle of Meaning:** Hope, healing- write down your life's pleasures & significant positive elements. Appreciate the list when down/over-stressed.
  - **Delayed response:** be aware that traumatic reactions can come to the surface later.





## To be resilient:

- **Self-awareness-** a more confident mindset helps to anticipate how to react at the scene
- **Taking care of yourself –** thoughtfully prepping ourselves ahead can save stress on-scene
- **How we take care of ourselves informs** how we can take care of our survivors







# Team Well-Being

## CERT teams do this for each other:

- ★ Team briefings before team actions
- ★ Emphasize teamwork
- ★ Open communication
- ★ Recognize changes- encourage breaks, rotate
- ★ Phase out workers gradually
- ★ Arrange post-event debriefing

## Image 5.2: Self Care Toolkit (cont.)

### Self-care Toolkit

### Unit 5, pages 4 - 6

How can you tell others what you need? How will you tell them?

The following areas are daily things that we either do or do not do that affect our ability to respond to emergencies. Following each one, rank how well you do in that area (1 = very poor, 10 = excellent) and then write down one action you can take to improve that area by one point.

|           |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
|-----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| Nutrition | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|-----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

What can you do:

|       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| Sleep | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

What can you do:

|                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| Manage Workload | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

What can you do:

|                    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
|--------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| Balanced Lifestyle | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|--------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

What can you do:



## Primary Responses To Stress

- **Freeze:** on guard and watchful
- **Flight:** Flee
- **Fight:** Attempt to combat the threat
- **Fright:** Tonic immobility
- **Faint:** Fear-induced fainting

# Traumatic Stress

Traumatic stress may affect:

- ★ Cognitive functioning
- ★ Physical health
- ★ Interpersonal emotional reactions

## Possible Physical Symptoms

- Poor appetite
- Diarrhea, stomach pain, or nausea
- Headaches or chest pain
- Hyperactivity
- Inability to sleep
- Fatigue, low energy
- Increase in alcohol or drug consumption



## Cognitive Symptoms:

- Difficulty making decisions, racing thoughts
- Distortion of time and space
- Poor concentration
- Repeatedly replaying disturbing memories, flashbacks
- Always being on guard, on constant alert
- Irrational



## Emotional Symptoms



## LOW-RESPONSIVENESS

- Withdrawal
- Disoriented, vacuous
- Repeated bouts of crying
- Numbness, detachment, dissociation
- Feeling abandoned
- Denial
- Overwhelming guilt



## LOW RESPONSE SURVIVOR

**OBSERVE FIRST:** Always ask permission to enter their space. Language Shock?

**PROTECT:** “Can you tell me what’s going on?” Ask immediate needs or concerns.

- Privacy
- Avoid talking down to quiet, older, or physically hurt/challenged
- Listen for positives
- Just sit with them. Try silence. Not everyone’s a ‘sharer’
- Stressful survivors: Refer

**CONNECT:** Familiar community, clergy

- Leave them comfortable: Blanket, hydration? Mention your time constraints



## OVER-AROUSSED SURVIVOR:

- Agitation, anger
- Breathing heavily, erratically
- Feeling loss of control
- Always on alert; suspicious
- Over-exhilaration about surviving
- Overwhelmed by scene
- Deep frustration

# Over-Aroused Survivor

**OBSERVE:** Anxiety, fear, unpredictability, traumatic grief sometimes present as anger  
Clear, polite, respectful confident communication can prevent negative encounters.

**PROTECT:** Use active, empathetic listening: occasionally paraphrasing:

“... What I’m hearing you say is.....”

Speaking slooowly, evenly paced

**CONNECT:** engage in a task, to feel useful, as distraction. Helping can be restorative

**Help survivors focus on  
specific manageable feelings and goals**



## Avoid Saying . . .

- ★ “How are you?”
- ★ “I understand”
- ★ “Don’t feel bad”
- ★ “You’re strong/ You’ll get through this”
- ★ “Don’t cry”
- ★ “It could be worse”
- ★ “At least you still have \_\_\_\_\_”

## Instead Say . . .

- ★ “I’m here to listen”
- ★ “Is there something I can do to assist you?”  
“What might you need right now?”
- ★ “This IS difficult/challenging...”
- ★ “Crying (or other feeling) is a very natural response to what’s just happened”
- ★ “Would you like to help with.... -Your assistance would be very valuable!”





## Handling Deceased

- Treat remains with respect
- Follow local protocols

## Informing family

Forethought

Quiet, private place

“I’m sorry, but your family member/ name has died. I am so sorry.”

Let the family and friends grieve

Record of circumstances, date, time

*Take the roles*

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*Let's try it*





## Critical Incident Stress Debrief (CISD)

- Share reactions, concerns  
reduce residual stress  
Voluntary & confidential
- When leaving an assignment



- A few days after the disaster

Expect returning to routine life will require transitioning

*“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced”*

James Baldwin

# Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

1. Set rules: everyone gets opportunity to be heard
2. Review of facts
3. Review of reactions
  - Cognitive
  - Emotional
  - Physical
4. Sharing personal experience of incident
5. Instruction about stress reactions (e.g., survival behaviors are normal) & mitigation services
6. Follow up- Check in with each other

# Review

- **Prepare before a disaster**
  - Increase knowledge, & practice skills
  - Readiness through lifestyle; Stress triggers & solutions?
- **Assess the situation**
  - Who are you dealing with? Person, state of mind, culture
  - Phase of event ...
- **Respond to the type and intensity of the situation**
  - Observe, Protect, Comfort, Connect
  - Listen effectively
- **CERT Team stress reduction**
  - Buddy care
  - Debriefs

## Keep Your Senses About You...



Even Your Sense of Humor!

## Recommended Reading

- ***The Unthinkable***, “Who Survives When Disaster Strikes – And Why”  
by Amanda Ripley