

Helping In Times of Disaster Psychological First Aid

In times of crisis, volunteers may be essential in supporting the work of medical and mental health providers. There is a fine line between basic helping skills and counseling skills. Basic helping skills entail listening and providing information regarding available resources. Ethically, it is essential that helpers understand and act within the limits of their knowledge and skill base.

The Virginia's Terrorism and Disaster Behavioral Health Advisory Council (TADHAC) in conjunction with the Virginia Department of Health/ Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse (VDH/DMHMRSAS) has published the following guidelines in training individuals to assist in providing basic helping skills during times of disaster:

Protect

1. Contact and engagement
 - Offer respect. Politely observe first; don't intrude. Then ask simple respectful questions to find out how you may be of help.
 - Be prepared. Affected people may avoid or cling to you.
2. Safety and comfort
 - Speak calmly. Be patient, responsive and sensitive.
 - Speak clearly. Use simple, concrete terms; don't use acronyms. If necessary, speak slowly.
3. Stabilization
 - Point out strengths. Acknowledge the positive features of what the person has done to keep safe and reach the current setting.

Direct

1. Information gathering: current need and concerns.
2. Practical assistance
 - Deal with immediate needs. Adapt the information you provide to directly address the person's immediate goals and clarify answers repeatedly as needed.
 - Share helpful information. Give information that is accurate and age-appropriate for your audience. If you don't know, tell them this and offer to find out.

Connect

1. Connection with social supports.
2. Information on coping.
3. Linkage with collaborative services.

How to Prevent Harm in Helping During a Crisis

One of the most important things to keep in mind in helping others is to avoid doing harm. People in crisis are vulnerable, and it can be tempting to want to take over and make decisions for them. Yet, it is critical to be supportive while respecting individual boundaries and right to self-determination. The following points highlight specific things to avoid in being a competent helper during crisis:

- Don't be a mind reader. Do not make assumptions about what the survivor is thinking, feeling or experiencing.
- Don't assume trauma. Do not take for granted that everyone exposed to a disaster will be traumatized.
- Don't pathologize. Do not label anyone with symptoms or diagnoses.
- Don't talk down to a survivor. Do not patronize survivors, or focus on their helplessness, weaknesses, mistakes or disabilities.
- Don't assume they need you. Do not think that all survivors want or need to talk to you.
- Don't debrief. Do not probe for painful or gory details of what happened.
- Don't spread rumors. Do not speculate or offer unsubstantiated information.
- Don't be faddish. Do not suggest fad interventions. Stay with the tried-and-true basics of meeting immediate needs with respect and sensitivity.

Helping The Helpers During Disasters

When disasters happen, dedicated volunteers and professionals swing into action to help those

affected by the tragedy. They may include Red Cross volunteers, city officials, National Guard troops, fire and police departments, health care workers and many others. The hours they serve can be long, continuous and exhausting, resulting in tremendous strain physically, mentally and psychologically.

As Becky White, LSU AgCenter family and consumer sciences specialist, notes, these helpers also have needs. "As the weeks pass after such a disaster, many of the generous professional and volunteer helpers will still be on the front lines. Unfortunately, during crisis the emotional and physical needs of those who help others are often forgotten. In some cases, these giving individuals may not even consider their own needs. They may seem to be untouched by frustration, fatigue, stress and depression," she says. "And because the circumstances are so drastic, they often think they should stay the course."

Helpers need to take care of themselves to have the emotional and physical resources to help others. "Volunteer and professional helpers also can use help from people not directly affected by a crisis," says Sean Brotherson, North Dakota State University Extension Service family science specialist. "Provide support to the helpers so they can give support to others. To help communities recover after a disaster, the load must be shared. The helpers need to know that others are willing to stand with them and provide continuing support."

- Realize when a situation or problem should be referred to another helper.
- Be aware of your energy limits and stop when those limits have been reached.
- Set priorities for your time.
- Know your strengths and weaknesses.
- Learn to say no without feeling guilty.
- Take time for pleasure.
- Change the environment periodically for short

breaks.

- Seek normalcy where it can be found.
- Communicate with people who understand the endeavor.
- Practice optimism and humor.

But others also can help the helpers, White says. "If you have a family member or friend who is helping in relief efforts, you can help them," White says. "Keep connected and express appreciation for what they are doing."

Other suggestions for ways you can help those involved in the relief efforts include:

- Encourage them to follow sensible health habits.
- Repeatedly show appreciation for the helper's work.
- Help them with everyday tasks.
- Invite the helpers to talk about their experiences.
- Help the helper accept help; offer something specific instead of "call me if you need anything."
- Do not rush helpers; their sense of time may be distorted.
- Reassure them that their stress is normal, and remember most people recover well from stress.
- When requested, provide information about the world outside the disaster.
- Respect their privacy.

Sources:

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