

## Disaster Response for Healthcare Providers

During a disaster response, it's important in the immediate aftermath to provide education and support to increase a sense of safety, calm, self-efficacy, connectedness and hope. Here are some steps to guide initial interactions:

### 1) Help people regain sense of safety

- **The basics:** The first step is to promote activities and resources that provide a sense of physical safety and provide basic needs such as shelter, food and water. It's important to encourage people to connect with loved ones for support.
- **Communicate:** Accurate information to those affected is critical. A disaster can be made worse by rumours or misinformation. Encourage those affected to limit their exposure to media, seeing or hearing information about a disaster or emergency over and over can cause more stress and reduce their ability to cope.

### 2) Help people promote a sense of calm

- **Normalize:** In the immediate aftermath of any disaster or emergency situation feelings of arousal or numbing are seen as adaptive; however prolonged arousal states can disrupt important coping mechanisms such as proper sleep, hydration, proper nutrition, decision making and performance of daily activity and life tasks. The main goal is to tap in to the individual's pre-disaster strengths to move through the initial stages of coping. Sometimes immediate debriefing and allowing people to ventilate can actually increase arousal at the very time they need to feel calm. Helping survivors find a more relaxed state is an important first step, while avoiding activities that might accentuate a preoccupation with the disaster.
- **Provide education:** Help survivors know what to expect after a disaster or emergency, give examples of both normal feelings and what to look for if becoming overwhelmed. This can help alleviate immediate concerns about emotional safety. Help survivors understand which reactions are normal reactions to an abnormal situation and provide information about symptoms that may mean a person is feeling overwhelmed. Provide guidance on where to go and who to speak to if more help is needed.

#### Strategies to promote calming include:

- Therapeutic grounding techniques (consider culture, beliefs and values when finding ways to promote grounding).
- Deep muscle relaxation, Yoga and Breathing meditations, physical activity – ie walking.
- Respectfully promote laughter and humour and getting involved in activities, such as watching situation comedies/movies, being with friends, All of these activities can provide distraction and stop people from becoming hypervigilant and preoccupied with events by promoting a sense of predictability, normalcy and positive emotions.

### 3) Help Promote Sense of Self and Collective Efficacy

- **Encourage:** Promote activities that help people regain a sense of control by helping individuals to break down any immediate problems into small, manageable units. This can provide opportunities to create feelings of accomplishment in the face of adversity.
- **Reinforce existing strengths:** Promote activities that have been initiated by the community itself to promote self-efficacy, include community members in decision making and planning of any activities. Restore opportunities for people to carry on regular activities as well as opportunities for individuals to contribute to helpful group activities.

#### 4) Promote Connectedness

- **Enhance social support:** Connecting to loved ones is crucial and it's important to ensure people are able to have contact with their social supports e.g., family, loved ones, friends.
- **Tap into existing social and community supports:** Communities may have established methods of connecting and gathering, helping to promote these pre-existing connecting activities can help communities build on their strengths in times of crisis. Remember to customize messages so they are sensitive to culture, beliefs, language, literacy, socioeconomic level & special needs. This can be done by including existing community leaders in relief efforts and in communication efforts.

#### 5) Instill hope

- Continue normalizing people's responses to disaster. Helping survivors envision a challenging but realistic future can instill hope and optimism.
- Support rebuilding activities that incorporate the pre-existing strengths of the community. Provide support by helping individuals and community members to navigate through the complex system of recovery of basic needs such as housing and replacing of basic resources. This type of activity can instill a sense of possibility beyond the immediate impact of the disaster or traumatic event.

#### Tips for Staff

To help you cope during these stressful times use your **A.C.T.I.O.N.S.** plan

**Activity.** Be active, exercise can help lower stress and tension and make you more alert. A 15 minute walk can be very calming.

**Communicate.** Talk to colleagues, family, friends or EAP about how you are feeling.

**Take a break.** Make time for yourself, socialize, do something creative or make time to do something that you enjoy.

**Identify.** Know what is causing your stress, accept what you can control and what you cannot.

**Optimism.** Look for the positive and focus on your strengths. Set limits when you're feeling overwhelmed and don't be afraid to ask for help.

**Nutrition.** Make sure to eat regular meals and drink water. Limit snacks with lots of sugar. Try to avoid drinks with a lot of caffeine and sugar.

**Sleep.** Get enough sleep. Too little sleep can make you feel overwhelmed, which makes it hard to cope. If you need to, take 15 to 45 minute naps during the day. Don't nap after 6:00 p.m. so you are tired at bedtime.

#### Other things to keep in mind

- Recognize that you or others have been through a distressing experience. Give yourself and others permission to be angry, frustrated or sad. During these times it's important to be patient with yourself and others.
- It's ok to find humour in life or in situations that occur if you can. Humour and laughter can help lower stress and tension.
- Acknowledge your losses. Experiencing a disaster or emergency may have resulted in a loss of belongings or your daily routine. Accept these losses and find ways to express your feelings to help yourself recover. Tears, laughter and play are natural responses that can help you and your colleagues cope.