

Disaster Response for Mental Health Care Providers

If you are enlisted as a mental health care provider during a disaster response it is 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 provide resources that enhance a sense of physical safety and provide basic needs such as shelter, food and water. It is important to encourage people to connect with loved ones for support.

Communicate: Promote delivery of accurate information to those affected. A disaster can be made worse by rumours or misinformation. This can increase feelings of threat to safety for individuals and communities. People need to know about the dangers of overexposure to media, which can affect positive coping skills.

2) Help people promote a sense of calm

Normalize: In the immediate aftermath of any disaster or traumatic 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 and groups pre-trauma strengths to move through the initial stages of coping. Sometimes the immediate debriefing and allowing people to vent 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 traumatic events.

Provide education: Help survivors know what to expect after trauma; give examples of both normal feelings and what to look for if becoming overwhelmed. It is important to recognize and educate others that most survivors are experiencing normal reactions to an abnormal situation. When survivors know that the immediate feelings of distress are normal it can help alleviate immediate concerns about emotional safety. 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, exercise.
- 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 hyper-vigilant 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) Promotion of Connectedness

Enhance social support: Connecting to loved ones is crucial and it is important to ensure people are able to have contact with their primary social networks: families and loved ones.

Tap into existing social and community networks: 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.

Mental Health Screening & Early Identification
Addiction & Mental Health
Health Promotion and Disease/Injury Prevention
Cube 1717, 10101 Southport Road SW, Calgary, AB, T2W 3N2
Phone: 403-943-6756 Fax: 403-943-2211
www.albertahealthservices.ca