

HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH A SURVIVOR OF A DISASTER

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
THE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

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How do people feel after disasters?



After disasters that affect many people, such as war or natural disasters, it is normal to feel a wide range of intense emotions. Many survivors lose their loved ones, so it is normal to feel strong feelings of grief. Also, disasters usually have a profound impact on our basic safety needs. Experiences of disasters can be followed by the presence of:

- **Emotions.** People may experience shock, disbelief, anxiety, depression, fear, anger, guilt, shame, helplessness, feelings of betrayal. Alternatively, people may feel numb or that their emotions are severely diminished. All these emotions arise as our brain try to understand and come to terms with what happened, and protect us from psychological pain or danger.
- **Thoughts.** People may feel lost, disoriented, find it difficult to concentrate. Many thoughts, vivid and unpleasant memories of traumatic experiences may also be present. People may blame themselves for what they had done or, on the contrary, what they had not done. They may also find it challenging to cope with simple everyday tasks.
- **Body reactions.** Tension and fatigue may be present in the body. Heart rate may increase due to elevated stress levels. It can be difficult to fall asleep; nightmares may be present. People may experience loss of appetite or nausea. At the same time, pain may be felt in various body parts. People may be especially alert, watchful, or easily startled by unexpected sounds, sights, or movements.
- **Relationships.** People may suddenly feel very dependent on others. Alternatively, they may become distrustful of other people, feel rejected or avoid others. In relationships, there may be much more anger, irritability or conflicts. People may become highly critical. Also, an extreme desire to control and protect loved ones may be present.
- **Spirituality / Sense of meaning.** People may feel that life is pointless to the extent that it might be challenging to carry out normal daily activities. There may also be much confusion about faith, reluctance to engage in regular religious practices (e.g., praying). Alternatively, there may be increased trust in a higher power, as well as a desire to pray or engage in other spiritual practices more.

These are not all reactions that can follow the experience of a disaster. The feelings, thoughts, and behavior of different people can be very **individual**. Mental health professionals consider these reactions to be adequate responses to extreme stress. **It is important to note that sometimes these reactions may appear later, not immediately after a traumatic experience.** At the time of the disaster, a person may be highly concentrated on survival, and only a few days or weeks later, when the external threat is absent, the quality of mental health can decrease significantly.



Long-term responses to traumatic experiences



A wide range of intense emotional reactions and mental health deterioration following disasters are normal. **However, one should seek professional support if:**

- These reactions are extreme and do not diminish over time;
- The person is perplexed and very disoriented;
- The health or life of the person or others is at risk (e.g., suicide risk, severe aggression);
- As the time after the disaster passes (after several weeks), strong emotions and unpleasant thoughts persist and do not diminish, and the person experiences extreme psychological distress, sadness, hopelessness, which disrupts his/her relationships with others, and everyday activities.

Potential mental health problems after severe traumatic experiences:

Posttraumatic stress disorder

A person is experiencing powerful images of the traumatic events and feels as if it is happening again in the here and now, even though a person is already in a safe environment. Nightmares about traumatic experiences are also often present. At the same time, a person is trying to avoid anything that reminds him/her of traumatic experiences. There are also extreme feelings of insecurity, a person gets easily startled.

Depression

A person experiences persistent sadness, low mood, feelings of emptiness, loss of pleasure, and decreased energy levels. It might also become challenging to concentrate.

Anxiety

A person worries intensely about everything or in specific situations. May also experience very intense anxiety attacks, i.e., panic attacks. Anxiety is accompanied by strong physiological reactions (increased heart rate, sweating, muscle tension, difficulty breathing, chest pain, etc.). Negative thoughts are also present.

Other

Mental health problems present before the disaster, or other mental health difficulties may also exacerbate.



How to communicate with a survivor of a disaster

"What is happening with you is normal"

Normalize the emotions, thoughts, feelings, and other experiences the person has. It may be important to confirm that his/her feelings are normal under such circumstances, that he/she has not changed permanently or gone mad. Tell a person that such feelings or behaviors are typical for many people after such devastating experiences. It is a normal reaction to abnormal events. There are no good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate emotions. People react to stress in very different ways. After some time since the traumatic experiences, most people start feeling well again.

"Now you are safe"

The human psyche can still feel like a person is at the center of disastrous experiences. If the situation allows and fits the reality, show and tell the person that he/she is now in a safe environment and is not in danger anymore. You can briefly discuss where the person is, remind him/her that the environment is now safe and that there are people here who will take care of him/her. Taking care of the basic needs (food, housing, etc.) can also help people feel safer.

"I care about how you feel and I want to talk to you"

Take the initiative to communicate with the survivor of the traumatic events. He/she may be shy or find it challenging to start a conversation because of all the stress. If you do not know the person, introduce yourself, show that you want to talk, and that you care to hear about how the person is feeling. Avoid cliché phrases such as "everything will be fine". Do not criticize.

"I respect your reluctance to talk"

Not all people want to talk about their difficulties or share their experiences with strangers. Also, not everyone needs support. Tell people that you are ready to listen, that you care, but you respect their wish not to talk at the moment. Don't pressure or demand that they share their difficulties and feelings with you. If possible, let them know that they can turn to you if they want to talk, but do not force them to do so right now. If possible, give them your phone number or contact details so they can reach you if needed. We can also express our support by just being in silence with the person if he/she is OK with it. Looking after a person's physical well-being or daily routine can also be a great way to show our support and care.



How to communicate with a survivor of a disaster

"I can listen to you calmly"

For many people, it might be important to express their difficult emotions and tell their stories. It can help them better understand what had happened, relieve inner tension and feel that they are not alone. So try to be an attentive listener. Try to make the person feel heard. Even though the stories might be shocking, try to remain calm. Speak in a calm tone. However, if you feel that talking about traumatic experiences would be too difficult for you, do not force yourself to do so. Help the person in other ways and look for other people or professionals who can provide emotional support.

"I respect and accept your feelings"

Try to be kind, respectful and compassionate even when the survivor is hostile or rejects you. Do not take it personally. Anger is a natural reaction that often follows experiencing disasters. It is a reaction to traumatic experiences. A person cannot react differently now. Be patient, and little by little this will help you establish contact with the person.

If you want to comfort someone with physical touch or a hug, make sure it is acceptable to the person, and only do it when you are sure a person feels comfortable with it. You can simply ask the person. However, be sure that he/she feels free to choose to refuse physical contact. After traumatic experiences, people can be very sensitive to intrusions into their physical space.

"Maybe I can help you take care of your needs?"

Disasters deprive people, at least for a while, of the ability to take care of their basic needs: safety, warmth, food, sleep, etc. See if a person needs anything, and you can take care of it. Maybe he/she is hungry or cold. If you can, make sure the person has food, water, a warm blanket, dry and warm clothes, and a phone to contact loved ones. Perhaps drawing, reading, or praying can help people calm down, and you can provide them with the necessary items. If the person expresses needs that you cannot take care of, see if you can find someone who can. For example, perhaps medical or mental health professionals are needed. If the person asks for something that you cannot provide, do not worry. Just let them know that we all have our limits, especially in times of crisis.



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"How can we take care of your health?"

Encourage the person to take care of his/her physical and mental health. High emotional stress can make it challenging to carry out even the most mundane daily activities. Encourage people (or help them) to eat, get enough sleep, and exercise. It is best if the person can regain at least part of his/her daily routine. This helps to regain a sense of structure and control. Perhaps you can suggest some stress-relieving activities or exercises? This can help to rebuild physical strength and reduce stress reactions. Encourage using appropriate coping strategies (e.g., walking outdoors) and avoiding negative ones (e.g., drinking alcohol).

"I believe that you can"

When helping someone after a crisis, it is also essential not to become too patronizing. It is important to offer your help and, if necessary, to help people to take care of their needs. Nevertheless, if the person can do things on his/her own, leave the initiative to them. Disasters significantly affect people's sense of ability to cope and control. The sooner people feel able to regain some control, take care of themselves and their family, the sooner they will regain psychological well-being. You can remind people that their capacity to cope with everyday challenges has not disappeared. It is just more complicated under much stress, and once these stress reactions are less severe, people can take care of themselves and their loved ones again. So, if necessary, help the person with his/her everyday decisions and problems. Nevertheless, do not take over the initiative when people can take charge of their own decisions and actions; encourage their independence.

"Maybe I can help you to contact your loved ones?"

If you can, help the person to contact and keep in touch with their loved ones. This is particularly important in a crisis. If it is impossible to keep in touch with loved ones, maybe you can help the survivors feel a part of the community in other ways. Check in to see if they have contacted their loved ones or friends, and try to offer help to make that happen.

"I will let you know what is happening"

If the crisis is not over, regularly provide the person with information from trustworthy sources about the current situation. Even providing information about having no news is very important. So, keep in touch and keep the person informed about relevant things, for example, that there is no new information about their loved ones or their health. However, encourage people to avoid constant monitoring of the situation, e.g., watching news related to the disaster on television, the internet, or social networks. This can be very debilitating as being confronted with reminders of traumatic events (images, sounds, etc.) may elicit powerful stress reactions, causing intense feelings of being back in an unsafe environment.



How to communicate with a survivor of a disaster

"Perhaps we need help from professionals?"

If you are worried about a person's physical or emotional health, seek help from professionals. They can help understand what is happening and advise what to do further.

"I am taking care of myself"

Keep in mind that it is not easy to support people in such circumstances and talk about their traumatic experiences, so take care of yourself. Try to be aware of your limits. Communicate. If you do not know what to do next, talk to your loved ones or seek professional advice. Share your feelings and thoughts with others (of course, stories of people going through traumatic events can only be shared with their permission!).

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Although disasters are incredibly shocking and affect people's psychological well-being, most people overcome the crisis and regain good emotional and physical health over time. Sometimes people may even experience posttraumatic growth when traumatic experiences bring positive life changes. For example, the person starts to value relationships or take care of themselves more, etc. Even if the consequences of the crisis to the person's mental health are more severe, modern science offers different kinds of professional help to aid in recovering psychological health and well-being.

Sooner or later, all crises come to an end. Let's take care of ourselves and affected people, and keep up our hope.



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