

**HANDBOOK FOR  
FIELD WORKERS**

# Acknowledgement

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Disasters are unfortunate, unforeseen situations that usually catch us off-guard. Predicting or controlling disasters is rarely ever in our hands. What we **CAN** do is to **MANAGE** a disaster situation in the best possible manner.

Disasters of this type can be sudden and overwhelming. In addition to the often catastrophic toll on lives and property it brings, a disaster like a tsunami, earthquake or fire also brings a flood of emotions. How people deal with these emotional reactions may affect their recovery afterwards.

### Can I help the survivors of the disasters

Most definitely. Infact, you could be an important support for the survivors. Before taking this difficult and taxing decision be certain that you can handle the pressures involved.

- I have been able to deal fairly well with my personal losses. I am not thinking about the losses that I have faced all the time.
- I am fairly patient. I can listen to what the other survivors may want to share.
- My communication skills are good.
- I am sensitive to others' pain.
- I am emotionally strong and can deal with survivors' distress.

### What to expect?

It is common for people who have experienced traumatic situations to have **very strong emotional reactions**. Understanding normal responses to these abnormal events can aid you in coping effectively with feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and help you along the path to recovery.

Shock and denial are typical responses to large-scale natural disasters, especially shortly after the event. Both shock and denial are normal protective reactions.

**Shock** is a sudden and often intense disturbance of emotional state that may leave one feeling stunned or dazed. **Denial** involves your not acknowledging that something very stressful has happened, or not experiencing fully the intensity of the event. You may

temporarily feel numb or disconnected from life.

As the initial shock subsides, reactions vary from one person to another. Many people survive disasters without developing significant psychological symptoms. Others, however, may have a difficult time "getting over it." Survivors of trauma have reported a wide range of psychiatric problems, including depression, alcohol and drug abuse, lingering symptoms of fear and anxiety that make it hard to work or go to school, family stress, and marital conflicts. The following, are normal responses to a traumatic event:

- **Feelings** become intense and sometimes are unpredictable. Moods become more irritable than usual, and you're likely to see the mood swing back and forth dramatically. You will come across people who are especially anxious or nervous, or even depressed.
- **Thoughts** and behavior patterns are affected by the trauma. Repeated and vivid memories of the event are common. These flashbacks may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. People find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused. Sleep and eating patterns also may be disrupted.
- **Recurring emotional reactions** are common. Anniversaries of the event, such as at one month or one year, as well as reminders such as aftershocks from earthquakes or the sounds of sirens, can trigger upsetting memories of the traumatic experience. These 'triggers' may be accompanied by fears that the stressful event will be repeated.
- **Interpersonal relationships** often become strained. Greater conflict, such as more frequent arguments with family members and coworkers, is common. On the other hand, there could be people who are withdrawn and isolated and who avoid usual activities.
- **Physical symptoms** may accompany the extreme stress. For example, headaches, nausea and chest pain may result and may require medical attention. Pre-existing medical conditions may worsen due to the stress.
- **Survivor's Guilt** Many survivors question why they survived and someone else

perished, particularly when their survival seems to have more to do with coincidence or luck than some conscious choice. This reaction is called "survivors' guilt" and it is a very normal response to a traumatic event. It is difficult for human beings to feel grateful for being alive, while at the same time feeling intense sorrow for those who did not survive.

### How do people respond differently over time?

It is important for you to realize that there is not one 'standard' pattern of reaction to the extreme stress of traumatic experiences. Some people respond immediately, while others have delayed reactions - sometimes months or even years later. Some have adverse effects for a long period of time, while others recover rather quickly.

And reactions can change over time. Some who have suffered from trauma are energized initially by the event to help them with the challenge of coping, only to later become discouraged or depressed.

### Who will need help?

- People reporting symptoms/ problems like restlessness, panic, sleep disturbances, nightmares, frequent recollection of traumatic events and frequent crying.
- People who remain isolated/ withdrawn most of the time and show no overt interest in the activities going on around them.
- Individuals showing reluctance to communicate when approached.
- People who have significant losses (like death of family members).

### How can I help?

Offering psychological support to disaster affected individuals is not a one time activity. Understand it as an emotional contract, a continuous and time taking activity. It can be understood as being friends with individuals to help them cope with their losses.

- Provide **practical help** in dealing with the disaster. Help friends or family pack or clean up. Store belongings or provide a place to stay. Parents may be very busy; offer

to spend some time with children to play and to listen to their concerns. Offer specific types of help or ask how you can help.

- **Listen.** When others talk about their experiences and feelings, their emotional load seems lighter to bear. One of the best ways you can help is to just listen. You don't have to come up with solutions or answers. It's okay if someone breaks down and cries. Others will ask "Why me?" They are not really looking for an answer but expressing their hurt. (Refer: 'Active listening')
- **Show** by words and actions that you care. Go ahead and act. Don't be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. A friendly arm around troubled shoulders or a few words of support and encouragement can help in times of crisis. Small, kind deeds and sincere expressions of affection or admiration also will mean a lot.
- **Keep helping.** The disruptions caused by the disaster may continue for some time. Recovering may take even longer. Revisit the people and try to keep in touch.

### When helping a child...

The intense anxiety and fear that often follow a disaster can be especially troubling for surviving children, especially if other children were victims of the disaster. Some may demonstrate younger behaviors such as thumb sucking or bed-wetting. Children may be more prone to having nightmares and the fear of sleeping alone. Performance in school may suffer. Other changes in behavior patterns may include throwing tantrums more frequently, or withdrawing and becoming more solitary.

There are several things parents, others who care for children and you as a volunteer can do to help reduce emotional consequences of trauma, including the following:

- Ensure the child is safe and is being looked after by a caring and responsible adult.
- As far as possible, do not institutionalize or adopt the child out.
- Be sensitive to knowing that a child often finds a toy or object or photograph

comforting and that they may choose to wear or carry it around with them constantly.

- Ensure regular monitoring of children who have been orphaned; check where they sleep; what their activities have been during the day and whether they feel safe.
- Provide resources for children to play with, to occupy themselves or to express themselves through.
- Arrange informal gatherings for children at places close-by to their families or new home bases so that children have the opportunity to play and talk together.
- Listen to children's stories. Often children are more comfortable expressing their feelings and experiences through make-believe stories or using objects.
- Encourage young people to take up a useful role of their choice to help in the healing process.

### When helping an adult...

- Allow crying and sharing of grief.
- Encourage the establishment of social support groups (religious groups, work communities).
- Facilitate going back to normal daily routine activities.
- Educate (information about the disaster, caring for oneself and the community, health practices, reconstruction)
- Encourage gainful employment in reconstructive tasks.
- Discourage the spreading of any rumours.

## DO NOT

- *Push the disaster affected individuals to conform to your way of going about things...try to be a part of their distress.*
- *Force them to "do" things or "talk"*

- Facilitate sharing of some community responsibilities by adults.

### When helping the old-age population...

- Ensure medical aid and physical well being.
- Guard against extreme feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.
- Encourage healthy grief reactions.
- Allow elders to talk about their fears and anxieties.
- Encourage group meetings with other elderly survivors.
- Encourage participation in community decision making.

### Active Listening

#### Begin With Listening

Effective helping begins with good listening. Good listening really means understanding what the other person is saying to you.

#### To listen better

- *Listen carefully and completely.*
- *Be non-judgmental.*
- *Keep an open mind.*
- *Do not jump to conclusions.*
- *Do not interrupt frequently.*
- *Do not laugh at or ridicule the speaker.*

### Listening to Help

Active listening is an understanding response that encourages the other person to talk or continue talking. Make the other person feel accepted and understood.

Here are several ways to demonstrate that you are actively listening:

- **Acknowledging** what the speaker says by saying "Mm Hm" or nodding. These simple responses say, "I'm hearing you."

- **Making eye contact.**

- **Leaning forward.** This body gesture says "I'm interested."

- **Using Silence.** You communicate impatience when you interrupt, do too much prodding or finish others sentences when they falter.

- **Use open-ended questions.** Ask a question that cannot be answered by "yes" or "no" to get more information or help the speaker begin sharing with you. Do not question excessively.

- **Paraphrasing.** Without interrupting, restate what has been said in your own words. If you have misunderstood, the speaker can give more correct information. For example:

**Speaker:** "My adult children tell me I should sell out now and move in with them. They say they'll take care of everything."

Listener: "Your children want to take care of you now."

- **Reflect feelings.** Without interrupting, respond to or give a name to the feelings you hear in what the other person says or does. This not only furthers the conversation, but also gives you and the speaker insight into emotional issues that might be hiding behind words. Example:

**Speaker:** "My adult children tell me I should sell out now and move in with them. They say they'll take care of everything."

Listener: "You're not sure you want to do that." Or, "Does that feel scary (or like giving up)?"

### Beyond Listening

As you listen and learn more about the survivors' situation, you may want to help. A good place to begin is by offering supportive statements. Respond to the survivor with a touch or

a comment that offers encouragement or acceptance of the survivor's thoughts, ideas and feelings.

Occasionally, you may need to confront the survivor with the contradiction you see between words and behavior. Interpreting the situation can help him or her face unexpressed feelings.

Guide in determining what the actual problems are. Help focus on the source of the difficulties.

Guide him or her in considering courses of action or resources for help.

## Activity Suggestions.

### Activity suggestions with children

1. **Facilitate expression** : Children can find it difficult to express emotions and difficult feelings. Various mediums can be used to help children feel less vulnerable and safer

- Drawing
- Writing
- Group Discussions
- Use puppets and stories

2. **Goal oriented activity**: such activities help foster confidence and directed behavior

- Collage making
- Small repairs

### Activity suggestions with adults

- Group Mourning: let people come together in groups and mourn the losses as a community.
- Group Discussion: open communication and encourage people to talk and express their pain and loss in group setting. This will help build solidarity and lessen the feeling of 'I am the only sufferer'.

- Cultural community activities: such as folk songs, participation in community activities etc.
- Relaxation and Exercises.

### Helping yourself....

It is a difficult and traumatic situation for you too. Do not neglect yourself. It is important to ensure your health, both physical and psychological.

- Participate in group activities.
- Allow yourself to mourn personal loss.
- Peer supervision: discuss issues and difficulties regularly with others like you working in the field.
- Do not deny your own emotional reactions or tensions.
- Keep some time everyday just for yourself
- Continue to work on routine tasks if it is difficult to concentrate on demanding duties. Ask your colleagues/ supervisors to reschedule your duties.
- Engage yourself in some relaxing activity on a regular basis, such as pursuing a hobby, reading, going for a walk.
- Ensure your physical well being. Take care of your health and nutrition.

### Seek professional help

Here's when to refer a person to a professional or supportive group :

- when you feel persistently uncomfortable;
- when you believe that improvement is "impossible" or the situation is "hopeless;"
- when the person says, "nothing is helping" or what you provide the person isn't helping;
- there are obvious or unusual changes in speech, appearance, or behavior, including memory confusion or hallucinations or delusions;
- the person continues to be so emotional, he or she can't communicate;
- there is ongoing deterioration (social and physical);

