



The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

SAFETY, RECOVERY AND HOPE AFTER DISASTER

Helping Communities and Families Recover

Disasters can present a cascade of impacts to those affected — individuals, families and communities. These disasters often promote feelings of fear, confusion, grief, helplessness, anxiety, anger, guilt and even diminished confidence in self or others. A variety of helpful interventions can assist individuals and communities to recover.

Following a disaster, governments and relief organizations play an important role in reducing distress for both victims and the broader society. Ensuring equitable distribution of resources (such as food, clothing and shelter) and prompt access to healthcare increase trust and improve outcomes. Adhering to ethical principles when providing interventions and relief efforts enhances community well-being.

When interacting with individuals affected by a disaster event, there is consensus among international disaster experts and researchers that Psychological First Aid (PFA) can help alleviate painful emotions and reduce further harm from initial reactions to disasters. Your actions and interactions with others can help provide PFA to people in distress, by creating and sustaining an environment of (1) safety, (2) calming, (3) connectedness to others, (4) self-efficacy—or empowerment, and (5) hopefulness. Consider the following suggestions:

DO:

- Help people meet basic needs for food and shelter, and emergency medical attention. Provide, simple and accurate information on how to obtain these (safety).
- Listen to people who wish to share their stories and emotions; remember there is no wrong or right way to feel (calming).
- Be friendly and compassionate even if people are being difficult (calming).
- Continue to provide accurate information about the disaster or trauma and the relief efforts. This will help people understand the situation (calming).
- Help people contact friends or loved ones (connectedness).

Following a disaster, governments and relief organizations play an important role in reducing distress for both victims and the broader society.

- Keep families together; keep children with parents or other close relatives whenever possible (connectedness).
- Give practical suggestions that encourage people towards helping themselves and meeting their own needs (self-efficacy).
- Direct people to locations of available government and non-government services (hopefulness).
- If you know that more help and services are on the way, remind people of this when they express fear or worry (hopefulness).

DON'T:

- Force people to share their stories with you, especially very personal details (may decrease calming).
- Give simple reassurances like “everything will be ok” or “at least you survived” (often diminishes calmness).
- Tell people what you think they should be feeling, thinking or doing now or how they should have acted earlier (decreases self-efficacy).
- Tell people why you think they have suffered by giving reasons about their personal behaviors or beliefs (also decreases self-efficacy).
- Make promises that may not be kept (decreases hope).
- Criticize existing services or relief activities in front of people in need of these services (diminishes hope and calming).

I'm doing all right, how can I help others?

- Check in with friends and neighbors frequently, especially those who may need assistance.
- Donate food, money or your time.
- Find ways to help others help themselves.
- Get to know those who live around you as you work together and rebuild.

Continued

How do I communicate with my children about the disaster?

- Children may not understand what has happened and may be concerned that it will happen again. They may worry about the safety of their family, friends, or pets.
- Listen to children, pay attention to what they say, and how they act. Watch for trouble sleeping, irritability, sadness, anger, worry, problems in school, difficulty concentrating and listening, and not finishing schoolwork.
- Let children know they are not alone and provide opportunities for them to talk about what has happened. Answer questions simply and honestly and tell them what is being done to keep everyone safe.
- Maintain daily routines, activities, and structure with clear expectations, consistent rules, and immediate feedback; limit unnecessary changes.
- Take breaks from the crisis with activities unrelated to the event.
- Prevent further traumatization by limiting access to television, the internet, or other forms of media that show disturbing scenes of the event.
- Help children maintain contact with their school and friends. Tell children how they can help, build on their strengths, and give simple “doable” tasks.
- Be aware of your own thoughts, feelings, and reactions as children will observe how you respond to the event and it will affect how they cope and behave.

