Psychological First Aid for First Responders: Tips for Emergency and Disaster Response Workers

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SAMHSA Resources At-A-Glance

Information Clearinghouses

National Mental Health Information Center (NMHIC)
P.O. Box 42557, Washington, DC 20015
(800) 789-2647 (English and Español)
(866) 889-2647 (TDD)
mentalhealth.samhsa.gov

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)
P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20847-2345
(800) 729-6686 (English and Español)
(800) 487-4889 (TDD)
ncadi.samhsa.gov

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Services Locator
(800) 789-2647 (English and Español)
(866) 889-2647 (TDD)
mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator
(800) 662-HELP (4357) (Toll-Free, 24-Hour English and Español
Treatment Referral Service)
(800) 487-4889 (TDD)
www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
(800) 273-TALK (8255)
(800) 799-4889 (TDD)

SAMHSA National Helpline
(800) 662-HELP (4357) (English and Español)
(800) 487-4889 (TDD)

Workplace Helpline
(800) WORKPLACE (967-5752)
www.workplace.samhsa.gov/helpline/helpline.htm

Managing Intense Emotions

When people are first faced with disaster and you first meet them, intense emotions are often present and appropriate. They are a result of intense fear, uncertainty, and apprehension.

DO:

Psychological First Aid for First Responders

When you work with people during and after a disaster, you are working with people who may be having reactions of confusion, fear, hopelessness, sleeplessness, anxiety, grief, shock, guilt, shame, and loss of confidence in themselves and others. Your early contacts with them can help alleviate their painful emotions and promote hope and healing.

Your goal in providing this psychological first aid is to promote an environment of safety, calm, connectedness, self-efficacy, empowerment, and hope.

**DO:**

**Promote Safety:**
- Help people meet basic needs for food and shelter, and obtain emergency medical attention.

**Promote Self-Efficacy:**
- Give practical suggestions that steer people toward helping themselves.

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(2) Adapted from "Nebraska Disaster Behavioral Health Psychological First Aid Curriculum" at mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/dtac/EducationTraining.asp.
Promote Calm:

- Provide repeated, simple, and accurate information on how to get these basic needs.
- Engage people in meeting their own needs.
- Listen to people who wish to share their stories and emotions, and remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel.
- Be friendly and compassionate even if people are being difficult.
- Offer accurate information about the disaster or trauma, and the relief efforts underway to help victims understand the situation.

Promote Connectedness:

- Help people contact friends and loved ones.
- Keep families together. Keep children with parents or other close relatives whenever possible.

DO NOT:

- Force people to share their stories with you, especially very personal details.
- Give simple reassurances like "everything will be OK" or "at least you survived."
- Tell people what you think they should be feeling, thinking, or how they should have acted earlier.
- Tell people why you think they have suffered by alluding to personal behaviors or beliefs of victims.
- Make promises that may not be kept.
- Criticize existing services or relief activities in front of people in need of these services. (1)

(1) Adapted from "Psychological First Aid," the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at www.centerforthestudyoftraumaticstress.org and used with permission.