



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. In order to counter these effects, disaster experts endorse an approach called Psychological First Aid (PFA), which can help reduce negative feelings and foster one's sense of safety, recovery and hope.

Other tips are provided to assist individuals and families in such situations.

**Psychological First Aid** promotes a sense of personal and neighborhood stability during periods of challenge. PFA seeks to restore: (1) safety, (2) calming, (3) connectedness to others, (4) empowerment, and (5) hopefulness.

#### **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 to help people understand the situation (calming).
- Help people contact friends or loved ones (connectedness).
- Keep families together — children with parents or other close relatives whenever possible (connectedness).
- Give practical suggestions that encourage people to meet their own needs (empowerment).
- Direct people to locations of available services (government and non-government (hopefulness)).

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- Remind people (if you know) that more help and services are on the way (hopefulness).

#### **Don't**

- Force people to share their stories with you (this may decrease calmness in people who are not ready to share their experiences).
- Give simple reassurances like “Everything will be ok” or “At least you survived” (statements like these tend to diminish calmness).
- Tell people what they should be feeling, thinking or doing or how they should have acted earlier (this decreases self-efficacy).
- Make promises that may not be realistic (un-kept promises decrease hope).
- Criticize existing services or relief activities in front of people in need of these services (this may decrease hopefulness or decrease 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.

#### **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.

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- 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.

