

TIPS for Working with Disaster Survivors: 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 fear, uncertainty, and apprehension.

DO:

Communicate Calmly:

- Sit squarely or stand using the L-stance (shoulder 90° to the other person's shoulder).
- Open posture.
- Lean forward.
- Eye contact.
- Relax.

Communicate Warmth:

- Use a soft tone.
- Smile.
- Use open and welcoming gestures.
- Allow the person you are talking with to dictate the distance between you.

Establish a Relationship:

- Introduce yourself if they do not know you.
- Ask the person what they would like to be called.
- Do not shorten their name or use their first name without their permission.
- With some cultures, it is important to always address the person as Mr. or Mrs.

Use Concrete Questions to Help the Person Focus:

- Use closed-end questions.
- Explain why you are asking the question.

Come to Agreement on Something:

- Establish a point of agreement that will help solidify your relationship and gain their trust.
- Active listening will help you find a point of agreement.

Speak to the Person with Respect:

- Use words like please and thank you.
- Do not make global statements about the person's character.
- Lavish praise is not believable.
- Use positive language.

If the Person Becomes Agitated, He or She May:

Challenge or Question Authority:

- Answer the question calmly.
- Repeat your statement calmly.

Refuse to Follow Directions:

- Do not assert control. Let the person gain control of self.
- Remain professional.
- Restructure your request in another way.
- Give the person time to think of your request.

Lose Control and Become Verbally Agitated:

- Reply calmly.
- State that you may need assistance to help them.

Become Threatening:

- If the person becomes threatening or intimidating and does not respond to your attempts to calm him or her, seek immediate assistance. (2)

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

SOURCE:

<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/Disasterrelief/pubs/manemotion.asp>