



Helping Survivors with Stress Management Skills

Crisis counselors can help survivors and their families understand that after a disaster it is often difficult to make good decisions about how to deal with stress. Crisis counselors can ask survivors and their families: How did you deal with stress before the disaster?, What worked for you? (What did not work in the past?), and/or What can you do today (or tonight) to deal with your stress?

Sometimes survivors and their families are aware that the stressors of the disaster can affect their ability to sleep, concentrate, and/or complete their daily activities/responsibilities. Survivors should be informed that there are inefficient coping skills that some people use after a disaster that are NOT helpful, such as:

- Not getting enough rest
- Binge eating
- Avoiding eating/starving
- Drinking alcohol / using drugs / smoking
- Excessive television watching
- Sexual acting out
- Aggressive behavior
- Other risky behaviors

When crisis counselors present different options of how to deal with post-disaster stress, it is important that counselors do not present the information as “boiler plate advice” as this might be rejected by the survivor and his/her family. Depending on the disaster, suggestions of positive effective stress management might vary. For example, it might not be safe to encourage a survivor to go for a walk or bike ride, as this activity may be hazardous to the person. Counselors also need to ensure that stress management skills are culturally sensitive and appropriate. More general suggestions might be:

- Good self care (sleeping, eating, rest)
- Use of a support system (family, friends, etc.)
- Set realistic short-term goals
- Maintain a normal (or new) schedule or routine
- Make to-do lists and prioritize them
- Set appropriate limits for yourself
- Be aware of your feelings. If you are overwhelmed, reach out to someone
- If possible decrease environmental stressors
- Reach out to others - do not isolate - ask for help if you need help
- Continue spiritual and religious practices as these can serve as a source of comfort
- Identify what works best for you in dealing with stress. Focus on what has worked well for you in the past
- Keep active. If appropriate, exercise
- Breathe deeply (stressed people often do not inhale or exhale deeply, and keep the body tense). Deep breathing can help the body relax
- Avoid overexposure to the disaster coverage by the media (e.g. limit watching TV coverage of the disaster efforts, radio coverage, etc.)

These stress management techniques should be presented with care and an understanding that some of the suggestions might not be helpful or possible. In addition, counselors should explore with the survivor and his/her family of other stress management techniques that might work specifically for them.

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