



## Emotional First Aid For Adults

### Emotional First Aid

People often experience strong and unpleasant emotional and physical responses to disasters. Responding with emotional first aid will help create and sustain an environment of safety, calmness, empowerment, hopefulness, and connection to others.

### Helpful Reminders

#### PLEASE DO

- Help meet basic needs
- Provide simple, clear and accurate information
- Listen with compassion
- Be friendly and calm
- Help reconnect with family, friends and caregivers
- Offer practical suggestions for helping themselves
- Encourage accessing disaster response resources
- Expect normal recovery

#### PLEASE DON'T

- Force people to share their stories
- Give reassurances like “Everything will be fine”
- Tell people what they should be feeling, thinking or doing
- Instill your personal beliefs on others
- Make promises you can't keep
- Criticize existing services or relief efforts

## ADULTS

### Possible responses following a disaster:

- Irritability and anger
- Feelings of anxiety and worry
- Fatigue
- Lack of concentration, forgetfulness
- Avoidance or denial
- Intense sadness and feelings of hopelessness
- Headaches and stomach / digestion complaints
- Sleep disturbances/sleeplessness
- Intense sadness
- Feelings of vulnerability and helplessness
- Preoccupation with tragic events that may disrupt daily life
- Increased risk taking
- Symptoms of depression
- Tendency to withdraw from social interaction
- Tendency to become reliant on drugs or alcohol

## SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP WHEN

- Marital problems occur
- Family conflict increases, loss of friendships, and problems at work or school
- There is no medical explanation for chronic physical pain
- Memories of the event disrupt daily activities
- You experience feelings of hopelessness, depression, or extreme anger
- You use alcohol or other drugs to help you sleep or hide your feelings

## TO HELP ADULTS

- Help meet basic food, shelter, and medical care needs
- Be friendly and compassionate, even if people are being difficult
- Give practical and accurate information
- Encourage accessing disaster response services
- Be culturally sensitive, don't impose your beliefs

## ELDERS

### Possible responses following a disaster:

- Forgetfulness resulting in diminished capacity to follow directions
- Loss of interest and withdrawal from daily life activities
- Reluctance to leave home and belongings
- Relocation adjustment problems
- Embarrassment about receiving “handouts”
- Unwillingness to ask for help
- Questioning the motives of responders and service providers

## TO HELP ELDERS

- Provide supportive presence and listen attentively
- Assist in making arrangements for care to meet basic needs
- Take special care to match elders to temporary shelters or appropriate housing
- Give practical and accurate information
- Be culturally sensitive, don't impose your beliefs

## SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP WHEN

- Sadness or depression continues beyond a few weeks
- There is continued sleep disruption or memory problems
- Despair about loss continues beyond a few weeks
- Confusion/disorientation continues
- Suspicions persist
- Apathy becomes pronounced
- Agitation or irritability persists
- Anger continues or intensifies
- Chronic illness is worsening or physical complaints persist
- Social withdrawal or isolation persists

## FIRST RESPONDERS

### May experience:

- Physical symptoms such as: chest pain, difficulty breathing, shock, fatigue, thirst, nausea/vomiting, profuse sweating, rapid heart rate, headaches, visual difficulties, jaw clenching, or non-specific aches and pains
- Confusion/disorientation
- Recurring nightmares and reliving disaster events
- Memory disruption/poor concentration
- Heightened or lowered alertness
- Poor problem solving
- Anxiety and feelings of fearfulness
- Guilt with sense of failure
- Grief, denial
- Heightened irritability, restlessness
- Loss of emotional control, feeling overwhelmed
- Severe panic (rare)
- Social withdrawal, depression
- Intense anger, emotional outbursts
- Temporary loss or increase of appetite
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Change in sexual functioning

## TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

- Pace yourself, don't try to do it all
- Take frequent breaks—eat and sleep regularly
- Take quiet breaks away from event if possible
- Access mental health resources available to you
- Accept what you cannot change
- Accept that recurring thoughts and dreams will occur, but if ongoing and severe, seek outside assistance
- Recovery from disaster response is a journey that may take you one step forward and two steps back

## TO HELP RESPONDERS

- Encourage frequent rest breaks and offer a quiet place for respite
- Provide support, listen when they need to talk, connect them with mental health support as needed
- Encourage eating at regular intervals and drinking plenty of fluids
- Be aware of other responders on-site to reduce risks to self and others
- Reach out to offer emotional support and thank them for their efforts

## PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

### Persons with sensory limitations may have:

- Difficulty with communication
- Disorientation during an evacuation or relocation
- Feelings of vulnerability and fearfulness
- Anxiety about being in a shelter or temporary evacuation site

### Persons with mobility limitations may have:

- Difficulty self-evacuating and require additional assistance
- Needs to be evacuated with their mobility aids or service animals
- Anxiety with separation from caregivers
- Feelings of being overpowered by first responders
- Fear of being placed in a more-restrictive setting

### Persons with mental limitations may have:

- Difficulty comprehending the risks in the emergency
- Difficulty communicating their needs
- The need for a caregiver to encourage cooperation
- The need for repetitive reassurance
- Fear about leaving their belongings to evacuate

### Persons with cognitive limitations or psychiatric disabilities may have:

- Increased feelings of vulnerability
- A need for additional reassurance they will receive adequate care
- Uneasiness relating their medical care to others

## TO HELP PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

- Provide a supportive presence and take steps to ensure their personal safety
- Do not leave them alone without adequate supports
- Help them to access needed care and match them with responsive services
- Take time to explain what has happened and what they can expect, repeat as necessary
- Answer questions and reassure in a calm manner
- Make every effort to reconnect with care providers and/or family

For assistance, contact the Missouri Department of Mental Health, Office of Disaster Readiness 573/751-4730 or 800/364-9687  
Information provided by: SAMHSA, Center for Mental Health Services, National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Disaster and Terrorism Branch.