

Trauma-Informed Disaster & Emergency Response

Mental and emotional health are greatly impacted by disasters and other emergencies. However, because it is not considered an “essential” need, specific teams that provide support for mental and emotional health may not be available for quite some time after an emergency occurs. We can approach everyone we interact with after an emergency in a supportive and trauma-informed way, however.

Empathetic listening is key to connecting with people impacted by an emergency and being able to help them effectively.

DON'T	DO
Ask questions that only result in "yes" or "no" answers.	Use open ended questions Example: "Can you tell me more about your current situation?"
Judge or shame their actions, experiences, or preferences.	Express acceptance for their situation, and our shared humanity. Examples: "That sounds hard." "Do you want to tell me more about that?"
Offer forceful instruction, tell them what they “must” do, or give them a plan without collaborating with them.	Offer accurate information, suggestions, help them think through challenges, and help them make a plan. Examples: “Do any of those options sound good to you?” “What challenges do you see?”
Use behavior change communication, coerce, or shame.	Offer support in a variety of ways: connect to extra food resources (or formula if formula-dependent), connection with other mothers/families, connect with a lactation support provider, etc. Also see above.
Get frustrated if the person you are trying to help is quiet, unable to make a decision, or avoids or delays responding to certain questions.	Remember that trauma shows up in many ways. Try giving extra time to respond, asking if they want you to come back, asking if they want more info, or offering two options. “Would you like a suggestion?” “Does ____ or ____ sound like it might help?”
Be critical of, express discomfort with, or leave because someone expresses emotion.	Some options: smile, say it’s ok to express how they feel, offer a tissue if convenient, ask if they want a hug or other support.

Caring for Ourselves as Responders

Disasters and emergencies of all kinds impact everyone who deals with them, including (and sometimes especially) responders, aid workers, and other volunteers. Caring for our physical and mental health is essential to being able to continue helping.

Basic Self-Care Reduces or Prevents Problems

These suggestions may sound basic and not worth mentioning, but in disaster work there is always more to do than can be done, and taking breaks can be challenging for many of us, especially in the field. It's important for your entire team to continually remind one another of the need to care for their own needs, even giving "permission" or support when necessary.

Meeting Physical Needs	Meeting Emotional Needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rest regularly• Stay hydrated• Exercise, stretch, move• Eat healthy food, including vegetables ;-)• Take a multivitamin if practical• Mask, gloves, wear PPE when indicated	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take breaks!• Do fun things sometimes• Journal• Meditate• Talk with others• Share losses and celebrate wins together

Raw or Resilient?

Recognizing when we are stressed, triggered, or no longer in an emotionally resilient state helps us know when we need to take more time to care for our own needs. Here are some ways we can recognize which state we are in.

When stressed or traumatized, we may...	When emotionally resilient, we will...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unknowingly hold tension in our bodies.• Ignore signs of hunger, thirst, pain.• Have difficulty making decisions.• Tend to be in arguments/disagreements.• Feel inhibited by fear or anxiety.• Get irritated at differences.• Not know how we feel emotionally.• Have trouble falling asleep.• Snap at people, or get angry easily.• Be unable to feel gratitude.• Feel hopeless or depressed.• Feel incompetent or unhelpful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be aware of tension and try to relax.• Be aware of our body's signals.• Know what we need to make decisions.• Be able to negotiate challenging events.• Be courageous.• Understand different perspectives.• Sense when emotions need processing.• Be able to settle ourselves to sleep.• Know when we are losing our cool and need a break.• Often be able to find gratitude in hardship• Be hopeful; see a path to improvement.• Feel competent to create change.

As responders, what helps us regain equilibrium?

Regaining equilibrium when we are already in a survival state (sympathetic dominance, aka fight or flight) is different from relaxing when we are feeling a little stressed, but feel secure and safe overall. For many people, some of the same techniques that help when feeling a little stressed will have no impact or may sometimes make one feel worse when in a survival state.

Techniques & Practices to Reduce the Impact of Traumatic Events

Do at least one each day, more as needed.

- Sighing & deep breathing, preferably with movement or sound
- Vagus nerve stimulation - sing/hum/gargle
- Bilateral stimulation (eg, EMDR, tapping, etc)
- Shake it out, dancing
- Express emotions - stomp, yell, hit pillows, etc.
- TRE (Tension Release Exercises)

- Talk with others
- Body movement (give specifics)
- Play music / listen to music
- Spend time with family/friends
- Nap
- Avoid caffeine, tobacco, and alcohol, especially in large amounts.

For more resources & an overview of some of these, visit

<https://melindadelisle.substack.com/p/helping-the-body-release-trauma>

Additional Resources

LIFE Basic Kit

A list of resources related to mental health available in the [L.I.F.E. Basic Kit](#).

<https://sph.unc.edu/cgbi/cgbi-resources-l-i-f-e-support-basic-kit/>

SAMHSA Disaster Mobile App

Offers first responders immediate access for any type of traumatic event at every phase of response, including pre-deployment preparation, on-the-ground assistance and post-deployment resources.

Apple: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/samhsa-disaster-response-app/id787518271?ls=1>

Google Play: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=gov.hhs.samhsa.app.disaster&hl=en>

Trauma-Informed Resources from SAMHSA

<https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/trauma-informed-approaches-programs>

Directory of Trauma- and Disaster-related publications:

https://library.samhsa.gov/search?facets=%7B%22tx_issues_conditions_disorders%22%3A%5B%22Trauma%22%5D%7D&pageNumber=6&b=1