

Post-Trauma Tips for Responders to Hurricane Survivors

What Therapists, Volunteers, Friends, and Family Can Do and Say

By Nora J. Baladerian, Ph.D.

People responding to trauma victims should use verbal communication skills to help survivors feel comforted, supported, and to assist them in psychologically starting to restore their prior state of well-being. While physical touch may be welcomed by some, for others it may be an intrusion of space, seeming like too much intimacy from a stranger, or inappropriate in some other way. For those with autism, or on the autism spectrum, unrequested touch can be painful. Words can be comforting and provide needed support. For some, sitting together in silence is a great comfort.

Here are some suggestions for responders, whether they are lay volunteers or mental health practitioners.

Understanding that trauma survivors respond in a variety of ways, there must be flexibility in verbal interventions. However, one basic tenet is *validation*. The responder's verbal statements that let the survivor know that they have been heard and understood and accepted. Using the teachings of Carl Roger's "Active Listening" can be very healing. Reflecting back to the survivor what they have said, lets the survivor know that. For example, when the survivor says, "I'm just so mad and overwhelmed," the responder can say, "I understand you are angry, and overwhelmed." Or using other words similar, followed by "I can completely understand why you feel this. It is normal and natural in this circumstance." This not only validates, but helps the survivor know that the feelings are normal following survival of a tragedy.

The responder can also help by focusing on the moment: "Let's take note of where we are right now. We are inside a shelter. We are waiting in line for breakfast." Modeling paying attention to the current moment can be stabilizing for the survivor whose mind likely is elsewhere, either reliving the trauma or forecasting a bleak future. Encourage the survivor to use the moment to focus on present time can be supported by having the survivor make a statement of appreciation, such as, "I am glad that there is food and shelter for me and my loved ones." "I am glad that I am healing from my injury, and lucky there were paramedics to assist me." Practicing appreciation of "the little things" helps the survivor focus his/her mind on possibility and a pleasant frame of mind, rather than re-living the tragedy of just a few days ago.

Things to say...and

We can be grateful you are alive and survived the storm
In such situations, most people feel confusion and helplessness.
I am here right now for you.
I want to be with you now to provide support.
What are your worries and concerns? Let's see what we can do.

things not to say

Everything will be OK.
I understand how you feel.
You are over-reacting.
Others are not so upset.
It could be worse!

It can be healthy to talk about your experience and feelings. However, some people prefer to keep it all inside. There are many ways of responding to a tragedy. (This is validation for those who do not want to talk, or talk about their experience.)

Encourage the survivor to focus on meeting his/her immediate needs: contacting loved ones, acquiring food, water, shelter, and getting medical attention (including medications). Encourage the survivor to begin planning for day-to-day needs, then shifting to the next weeks then next months. Taking concrete steps toward re-stabilization and re-building one's life is an important factor in healing,

Provide information:

Let survivors know that It is OK to be angry, sad, disoriented...those are natural feelings, among many others, that survivors of major tragedies experience. These feelings will transform over time. It is like having been attacked! Everything or much of what you experienced in your daily life has disappeared or changed.

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross found that there is a “map” of feelings that occur, starting with denial (this could not have happened), then anger (this should not have happened), then bargaining (with god or the universe) “If you help me, I’ll dedicate my life to x” then depression (“my life will never be the same, I have lost so much and I will not recover) then acceptance (“my life will be different and I will find my way.” The acronym DABDA helps to remember the “stages,” however the stages may not be sequential, and one or another may be prominent in any moment. In fact a person may feel several during the day. It is important to know that these thoughts and feelings are normal responses to trauma.

Dr. Peter Levine noted that response to trauma is also felt in the body, and new aches and pains, or nightmares often follow a trauma. He has done a great deal of work with veterans, helping them to heal. It is helpful and appropriate for a survivor to pay attention to new aches and pains (headaches, for example or backaches) can be useful, in paying attention, asking her/himself what were you thinking about when the pain came along, and tensing/relaxing the body, shaking the body, can be helpful.

Dr. Roger Callahan discovered a psychological treatment called Thought Field Therapy, which allows any individual to learn and benefit from it. A Thought Field therapy (TFT) treatment is demonstrated online by Dr. Mary Cowley, for trauma victims to self-administer (or administer to friends and loved ones) immediately for trauma relief: “For those traumatized by the hurricane, go directly to the page that has instructions and video demonstration for the trauma relief technique: [click here](#). For the Spanish language version, [click here](#) for the page with the instructions in Spanish. (Note: Thought Field Therapy is an approved evidence-based treatment for PTSD.)

The presence and full attention of the responder to the survivor makes a great deal of difference for the survivors, who feel the need for support during this time and may continue to feel the impact of such support long after. ◇◇◇

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