



# Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Understanding the Effects of Trauma and Traumatic Events to Help Prevent, Mitigate and Foster Recovery for Individuals, Organizations and Communities  
A Program of Uniformed Services University, Our Nation's Federal Medical School, Bethesda, Maryland • www.usuhs.mil/csts/

## PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID

### Helping Victims in the Immediate Aftermath of Disaster

As a healthcare provider, first responder, leader or manager of disaster operations, this fact sheet describes an evidence-informed approach for helping victims cope in the immediate aftermath of a disaster known as *Psychological First Aid*, and explains how to administer it.

*Psychological First Aid* aims to mollify the painful range of emotions and physical responses experienced by people exposed to disaster. These reactions include combinations of confusion, fear,



hopelessness, helplessness, sleeplessness, physical pain, anxiety, anger, grief, shock, aggressiveness, mistrustfulness, guilt, shame, shaken religious faith, and loss of confidence in self or others.

There is consensus among international disaster experts and researchers that *Psychological First Aid* can help alleviate these painful emotions and reduce further harm that can result from initial reactions to disasters. Please share this fact sheet with your disaster outreach colleagues.

#### *Do's and Don'ts for Promoting an Environment of Safety, Calm, Connectedness, Self-Efficacy and Hope*

The primary objective of *Psychological First Aid* is to create and sustain an environment of 1) safety, 2) calm, 3) connectedness to others, 4) self-efficacy or empowerment, and 5) hope.

#### **DO:**

##### **Promote Safety**

- Help people meet basic needs for food & shelter, and obtain emergency medical attention.
- Provide repeated, simple and accurate information on how to obtain these.

##### **Promote Calm**

- Listen to people who wish to share their stories and emotions and remember there is no wrong or right way to feel.
- Be friendly and compassionate even if people are being difficult.
- Offer accurate information about the disaster or trauma, and the relief efforts underway to help victims understand the situation.

##### **Promote Connectedness**

- Help people contact friends or loved ones.
- Keep families together. Keep children with parents or other close relatives whenever possible.

##### **Promote Self-Efficacy**

- Give practical suggestions that steer people towards helping themselves.
- Engage people in meeting their own needs.

##### **Promote Hope**

- Find out the types and locations of government and non-government services and direct people to those services that are available.
- Remind people (if you know) that more help and services are on the way when they express fear or worry.

#### **DON'T:**

- Force people to share their stories with you, especially very personal details (this may decrease calmness in people who are not ready to share their experiences).
- Give simple reassurances like "everything will be OK" or "at least you survived" (statements like these tend to diminish calmness).
- Tell people what you think they should be feeling, thinking or doing now or how they should have acted earlier (this decreases self-efficacy).
- Tell people why you think they have suffered by alluding to personal behaviors or beliefs of victims (this also decreases self-efficacy).

*Continued on reverse side*

*Don't, continued*

- Make promises that may not be kept (un-kept promises decrease hope).
- Criticize existing services or relief activities in front of people in need of these services (this undermines an environment of hope and calm).



*Photographs of the impacts of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf states. Top photo: destroyed bridge. Bottom photo: flooded residential neighborhood. Photos by Paul Morse, White House photographer. (These photos were taken from Air Force 1 when President George W. Bush flew over hurricane devastated areas on August 31, 2005, as he flew from Crawford TX to Washington, DC).*

*For more information on the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress and its resources (disaster fact sheets, articles and books) go to: [www.usuhs.mil/csts](http://www.usuhs.mil/csts)*

**PLACE LOCAL CONTACT INFORMATION HERE**



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