

After a Disaster: Supporting others

When a disaster or traumatic event occurs it affects people in different ways. You may want to offer support to those who are struggling with their reactions to the event, but you may not be sure what you should say and not say. Here are some suggestions to help guide you.

- Acknowledge the event and how they are reacting to it. You can say that what has happened is distressing and you are sorry for their pain.
- Let your genuine concern and care show. Ask “What do you need?” Offer solid, practical help, such as cooking a meal for them, driving them somewhere or picking up some of their workload or errands.
- If the person wants to talk about it, just listen. They may repeat details many times – this is part of dealing with what has happened.
- Leave it up to the person how much they want to talk about it and what they want to share. Avoid asking intrusive questions.
- Periods of silence can be positive – sometimes just having you be there is the most comforting thing for them.
- Some common reactions after a disaster include:
 - reduced concentration
 - withdrawal
 - crying
 - anger

Be patient with the person and don't take these reactions personally. Lower your expectations of that person for a while.

- Allow tears and laughter. There is no “proper” way for them to act.
- Remember that you can't take away their pain, but you can share it and make them feel less alone.
- Keep offering your companionship, even if it is declined at first.
- Gently encourage them to be active. For example, invite them to join you for a walk or to go shopping.
- Be careful not to assume that their faith beliefs are the same or similar to yours.
- Be supportive for the long term. It takes longer to recover from a disaster or traumatic event than most people realize. The person may still be struggling and needing support long after the event.
- Recognize your own reactions and take care of yourself.
- Support their use of professional help if needed. Tell them about the EAP and give them the phone number.

Try to Avoid

- Staying away from the person because you are uncomfortable.
- Pretending nothing happened.
- Using clichés such as “I know just how you feel,” “Everything will turn out for the best,” “It must be part of a bigger plan”.
- Trying to “fix it” for them. You can't.
- Saying “You should...” They need your compassion more than your advice.



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