

SUPPORTING A PERSON IN DISTRESS

A person who experiences an exceptional event because of its suddenness, intensity, or seriousness can be extremely upset. They may be destabilized, psychologically disorganized and totally overwhelmed by their emotions. When the situation requires rapid action and a professional is not present at the scene, it is important that the people on the scene be able to adopt the right reflexes. This is everyone's business, not just the experts'. Most people recover well over time, especially if they have been able to restore their primary needs and receive support.

Recovery from trauma involves :

- Support, access to psychological, physical and emotional help.
- Confidence, the feeling of being safe.
- The hope of being able to recover.

⇒ ARE YOU ABLE TO HELP?

As much as possible learn about the situation at hand and consider your own condition (health, personal concerns) as it may affect your ability to help. Be honest with yourself, are you able to help in this particular crisis situation and at this particular time?

WHAT I TRY TO DO WHEN I OFFER MY HELP



- ⇒ Be honest and trustworthy
- ⇒ Respect the person and his/her decisions
- ⇒ Explain what I'm offering and over what time frame
- ⇒ Know my limits
- ⇒ Probe the person about his/her expectations of confidentiality .
- ⇒ Inform the person about possible support and follow-up options.

WHAT I AVOID



- ⇒ Not taking advantage of my position as a caregiver.
- ⇒ Not forcing the person to tell his/her story or imposing my help.
- ⇒ Not to judge or confront the person.
- ⇒ Not asking for money or a favor in exchange for my help.
- ⇒ Not to make promises that I cannot keep.
- ⇒ above all : DO NOT HARM

MORE IN DETAILS

Assisting a person in distress will require you to be calm, reserved and focused. It is not helpful to add your anger or fear to theirs, nor to relate your experiences or those of others. Instead, focus on accepting their emotions and understanding their traumatic experience. Try to listen carefully and understand why they are reacting the way they are before responding. If a person feels detached from reality, you can:



- help him/her reconnect by offering to put his/her feet on the ground or clap her hands on her knees to feel physical contact
- pointing out the non-emotional things around her/him, asking her/him what she/he sees and hears
- Encourage her/him to focus on her breathing and to breathe slowly.

1. OBSERVE AND ASSESS

Crisis situations can change quickly. What you encounter may be different from what you were warned about. Take time, even briefly, to observe the situation before offering to help.

- Assess the situation.
- Protect yourself (avoid putting yourself in danger, don't make the situation worse by trying to help).
- Stay calm and focused.
- Be aware of your limits and what you can offer.

If you identify several people in distress, and you are the only person who can offer help, you will have to prioritize based on what you observe and the information you have. People who are in deep or enduring distress may need more support. In this case, make sure they are not left alone and, if possible, keep them safe until you can get help from another person or refer them to professionals.

Signs of distress (not an exhaustive list):

Shaking, startled, crying, spasms, crying spells
Anxiety, panic fear - Shouting, anger, irritability
Shame and guilt (e.g. for surviving, or for not helping or saving others)
Confusion, disorientation, prostration, inability to make decisions
Inability to care for oneself or one's loved ones.

2. APPROACH

- Approach the person and introduce yourself.
- Ask if you can help and, if so, find a quiet place where they feel comfortable and safe.
- Keep an appropriate distance and respect their boundaries.
- Try to get a sense of her non-verbal communication expectations (eye contact or not, nodding or nodding) and make sure she agrees before you touch her.
- Even if it's sometimes obvious, always ask her what her needs are.
- Define together what is most important to her, help her express her priorities, and set an end time, if possible.

3. LISTENING

- Remain focused and attentive to what the person is saying.
- Accept what the person is saying and sharing without judgment.
- Speak calmly and in simple, understandable words.
- Offer to rephrase if you are not sure you have understood what the person has said.
- Be patient, leave room for silences, do not force the person to speak.
- Respect their rhythm, let them speak without rushing or interrupting them.

4. REASSURE AND INFORM

A person in distress may feel overwhelmed by the situation. You can help him/her to express her needs and regain control by, for example:

- Helping her identify their supports (friends, family, confidants...),
- helping her identify her strengths (how she has overcome difficult situations in the past, what has helped her feel better) and find positive adaptive strategies
- making concrete suggestions to help her meet her needs (e.g., by referring to a psychological support structure or to a professional)

In all cases, respect her decisions and do not deprive her of her power to act.

Be careful to share only information that you are sure of, don't invent anything ("I don't know, but I will try to find out for you"). Deliver it in a simple way and repeat it several times, making sure the person understands it. Ask if anything is unclear or if they need you to repeat it.

Before closing the time, make sure the person has no other urgent needs that need to be addressed. You can also, if this is what he/she expects and if you have agreed together, offer to give him/her a summary of your exchange, in a simple and factual

way, and of the support, follow-up and healing possibilities that you have identified together.

5. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND YOUR TEAM

Helping responsibly also means taking care of yourself, your health, your well-being and knowing how to set limits. As a caregiver, you may be affected by the stories you hear. Make sure you are able to support others before you offer it. If you are working with a team, this also means listening to the needs and difficulties of other caregivers and being able to support each other..

⇒ DURING - SUGGESTIONS TO MANAGE YOUR STRESS

- Look for things that have helped you deal with difficult situations in the past.
- If you are helping for a long time, remember to eat, rest and relax even for short periods of time.
- Keep a reasonable pace to avoid burnout and, if you are working with a team, take turns (with the agreement of the person concerned).
- Do not take responsibility or the emotional burden of the experiences of the people you are helping. Do the best you can within your means and circumstances.

⇒ AFTER - REST AND REFLEX

- Discuss your experience with someone you trust.
- Name the help you think you gave.
- Identify (and accept) what may not have worked as you would have liked.
- If possible, take time to rest before returning to your daily activities or work.

⇒ ASK FOR HELP WHEN, FOR EXAMPLE

- You have overwhelming memories of the testimony you received.
- You have trouble sleeping.
- You feel irritable or very sad.
- You have an excessive consumption of certain products (alcohol, drugs...)

Do not hesitate to turn to a professional if you feel that these difficulties persist.

Main sources of this document :

Psychological first aid, a guide for people in action (WHO)

Activist Trauma website <https://www.activist-trauma.net/fr/home.html>

Support and Recovery website <https://supportrecoveryteam.wordpress.com/>