Traumatic Stress in the Aftermath of Catastrophic Events

Managing the Emotional Trauma in Survivors and Responders

Dr. Ray Shelton
Director, Professional Development
National Center for Crisis Management
American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress

The Imprints of Horror

STRESS & CRISIS

• Individuals exist in normal states of balance where they have established a "world view".

• Occasional stressors move individuals out of balance – while staying within a familiar emotional range.

• Trauma throws individuals so far out of balance it is difficult for them to restore a sense of balance and normal function.

Crisis Reaction Warning

Be alert to...

Difficulty Breathing
Chest Pain
Shock Symptoms

Traumatic Incident Stress

The point when demands become extremely threatening, overwhelming, or severe, producing a heightened state of physical, cognitive, behavioral & emotional arousal.
Elevated High Stress Exposure

Normal Coping Range

Traumatic Incident Reactions May Be . .
Cumulative or Incident Specific, Immediate or Delayed

Traumatic Stress Response
Effect on Survivors & Responders

- Intense fear/ anxiety
- Re-experiencing the event flashbacks & nightmares
- Avoidance of discussion regarding event
- Distortion of event, memory impairment
- Loss of focus and concentration
- Frustration, Anger, Irritability
- Grief
- Substance abuse
- Desire to isolate & loss of intimacy
- Difficulty making decisions
- Startle response
- Physical distress

CRISIS INTERVENTION
Urgent & acute emotional “first aid” designed to reduce symptoms of distress, while assisting the person to return to a state of adaptive functioning. Crisis intervention is not psychotherapy.

ACUTE TRAUMATIC STRESS MANAGEMENT
Assisting Distressed Individuals

A practical, goal directed approach that addresses the emergent psychological needs of individuals who are experiencing traumatic stress associated with a wide spectrum of events.

CAUTION
Assess for Danger
Your Mission – To return home safely

- Are there factors that can compromise your safety or the safety of others?
- Consider environmental / structural dangers.
- Prepare for possible emotional / mental impact.
- Wear protective gear.
- Stay alert.
Observe & Identify

- What was their level of exposure?
- How did the event *perceptually* impact the individual?
- Be alert to stress reactions. Do they need medical assistance?

Connect with the Individual

- Show interest and concern.
- Make an effort to understand his/her situation.
- Hold the facts.
- “Connecting” should be viewed as an ongoing process.

Empathy vs. Sympathy

Examples of Empathic Responses/Statements

- “You seem scared and alone right now.”
- “It’s like you just can’t stop playing the tape of the storm over and over in your head.”
- “You’ve been through a tough time.”
- “I know this is a difficult time for you.”
- “It’s OK not to be OK.”

Ground the Individual

Stopping Negative Thoughts

Have them tell their story.
Stay with the facts!

Provide Support

- Be present.
- Understand and respect the uniqueness of the individual and their situation. Remember, THEY have not been here before!
- *Do not attempt to talk a person out of a feeling.*

Normalize the Response

- Normalizing and validating an individual’s experience will help them to know that they are *normal*, trying to deal with a powerful negative *abnormal* event.
- Begin to *educate* them by explaining how people typically respond to traumatic events.
**Validation Technique**

1. Recognize their response to the trauma. “I can see that you are overwhelmed.”
2. Tie a validating statement to their response. “With what you have experienced you should be overwhelmed.”
3. Immediately explain, at a factual level, why you have come to that conclusion. “You’ve been through a lot & are responding like a normal person trying to cope with such a negative, frightening experience.”

**Prepare for the Future**

*Lessen the fear of the unknown*

1. Provide information about the steps to come.
2. Set realistic goals and expectations.

**Guidelines for Managing Crisis, Traumatic Stress**

- Drink plenty of water, exercise, get enough sleep.
- Avoid alcohol/caffeine.
- Become physically comfortable.
- Use quick relaxation techniques.
- Limit exposure to the news.

**Traumatic Stress Management**

- Talk, release the thoughts and feelings, write your way through sleepless nights.
- Take time for recreation.
- Set realistic goals, don’t push.
- Listen to the wisdom of your body.

**“Let’s Be Careful Out There”**

*Sgt. Phil Esterhaus, Hill Street Blues*