

## **Stabilizing Emotionally Overwhelmed Survivors**

From: National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD, Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide, 2nd Edition. July, 2006.  
Available on: [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org) and [www.ncptsd.va.gov](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov).

### **“Stabilize Emotionally Overwhelmed Survivors**

Observe individuals for these signs of being disoriented or overwhelmed:

- Looking glassy eyed and vacant-unable to find direction
- Unresponsiveness to verbal questions or commands
- Disorientation (for example, engaging in aimless disorganized behavior)
- Exhibiting strong emotional responses, uncontrollable crying, hyperventilating, rocking or regressive behavior
- Experiencing uncontrollable physical reactions-- (shaking, trembling)
- Exhibiting frantic searching behavior
- Feeling incapacitated by worry
- Engaging in risky activities

If the person is too upset, agitated, withdrawn, or disoriented to talk, or shows extreme anxiety, fear, or panic, consider:

- Is the person alone or with family and friends? If so, enlist them in comforting the distressed person. You may want to take a distressed individual to a quiet place, or speak quietly with that person while family/friends are nearby.
- What is the person experiencing? Is he/she crying, panicking, experiencing a "flashback," or imagining that the event is taking place again? When intervening, address the person's primary immediate concern or difficulty, rather than simply trying to convince the person to "calm down" or to "feel safe" (neither of which tends to be effective).

For children or adolescents, consider:

- Is the child or adolescent with his/her parents? If so, briefly make sure that the adult is stable. Focus on empowering the parents in their role of calming their children. Do not take over for the parents, and avoid making any comments that may undermine their authority or ability to handle the situation. Let them know that you are available to assist in any way that they find helpful.
- If emotionally overwhelmed children or adolescents are separated from their parents, or if their parents are not coping well, refer below to the options for stabilizing distressed persons.

In general, the following steps will help to stabilize the majority of distressed individuals:

- Respect the person's privacy, and give him/her a few minutes before you intervene. Say you will be available if they need you or that you will check back with them in a few minutes to see how they are doing and if there is anything you can do to help at that time.
- Remain calm, quiet, and present, rather than trying to talk directly to the person, as this may contribute to cognitive/emotional overload. Just remain available, while giving him/her a few minutes to calm down.
- Stand close by as you talk to other survivors, do some paperwork, or other tasks while being available should the person need or wish to receive further help.
- Offer support and help him/her focus on specific manageable feelings, thoughts, and goals.
- Give information that orients him/her to the surroundings, such as how the setting is organized, what will be happening, and what steps he/she may consider."  
(pp. 49-50).