

What Do Psychologists Do At Disaster Sites?

Whenever there is a disaster of any magnitude, psychologists often are mobilized to help.

To an outside observer, it would be difficult to tell the psychologist apart from the other volunteers who are also offering water or blankets.

But while psychologists are performing these services, they also are offering crucial emotional support after a disaster.

Because psychologists are uniquely trained in helping people cope with stress and strong emotions, they are able to help disaster survivors and first responders understand how common what they're feeling is, whether it's anger, sadness or other strong emotions.

Although psychologists do not offer therapy at disaster sites, they can help people build upon their own internal strength to begin the process of recovering from the disaster. Psychologists help those in disasters build their skills of resilience to move from feeling like hopeless disaster victims to disaster survivors with a realistic outlook about their prospects. This process can include taking small steps toward concrete goals and connecting with others as they learn to cope with both the logistical and emotional challenges of the disaster.

As psychologists offer this support, they may:

- Listen to people's concerns on a variety of issues including their homes, missing family members, and pets.
- Help people to manage their temporary living conditions and to acclimate to shelters located possibly far from their home state and in different environments.
- Provide information about available resources for current needs (clothing, medical care, etc); help to facilitate those connections.
- Advocate for the needs of particular individuals or families as they navigate the systems that have been established to provide aid.
- Help individuals to develop resilience skills by making connections with family and friends who've also survived or not been part of the hurricane; accepting that change is going to be an ongoing experience; maintaining a hopeful outlook; and helping people to develop their own personal recovery plans.
- Listen to parents' concerns about how their children will recover from the disaster and manage the challenges ahead (e.g. new schools, etc.).

- Help problem-solve conflicts among shelter residents; among family members; and among volunteers and staff.
- Help people to manage other life disasters that might be happening simultaneous to the hurricane aftermath (e.g. death or illness of a relative not related to the hurricane).
- Educate people that it is normal for disaster survivors to have an array of common reactions. Some of these include: fears, memories, nightmares, irritable and/or withdrawn emotions, and confusion.
- Assure people that it is possible to recover from disaster and to build fulfilling and satisfying lives.
- In working with children: notice and support positive coping strategies; help children to reestablish connections with others; help children to find ways to help others; help families reestablish familiar routines and structures; remind children and families of the importance of taking breaks from recovery efforts and other healthy self-care; and use disaster-related coloring books.
- Provide information on how and where to seek longer-term assistance.

Reference -- American Red Cross draft Foundations of Disaster Mental Health Manual.
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