

Helper: Heal Yourself

I. Introduction

Providing Emotional First Aid to a survivor of tragedy can be stressful and exhausting. Helpers are not effective if they themselves become overwhelmed by the tragedy and by the process of helping a survivor. Therefore, helpers need to know how to “replenish” themselves so that they can both get on with their lives and, if appropriate, provide care to the survivor over a period of time.

II. Self Care Principles for Helpers

A. Know your limits

Emotional First Aid is not meant to aid a person with chronic problems like mental illness or drug addiction. If these problems emerge in the process of your helping a survivor “do not go there”. You can say “*I’m glad I was there to help with _____, but I don’t feel I’m equipped to help with _____.*”

B. Return to Your Normal Routine

Helping a survivor after a tragedy may mean that your normal everyday routines are disrupted. As soon as possible return to those comforting routines.

C. Engage in Activities You Can Control

Helpers providing Emotional First Aid often have feelings of helplessness. After all, you can’t “fix” a survivor. There is little you can do. Just “being there” is what’s called for, but “being there” is difficult and involves feeling helpless. The way to counter this feeling of helplessness after helping a survivor (“*I didn’t do anything . . .*”) is to engage in activities you can control. These are activities like cleaning the house, gardening, and washing the car.

D. Completely Detach From the Tragic Event

As a helper, it’s important to know how to completely “get away” from the tragic event, especially if it’s a “high profile” event that is receiving lots of media attention. If you are helping a survivor after a high profile event, decide at some point not to continue following the event in the media. The best way to “escape” the tragic event is to engage in activities which “carry you away”. There are activities which totally engage you and cause you to forget everything else.

E. Look at the Big Picture

It’s common for helpers after the fact to second guess themselves . . . “*I should have done . . . to help*” Helpers often feel they didn’t do enough to help the

survivor. These feelings may be compounded by the fact that often survivors because of the awful experience they are going through do not thank the helper for the help provided.

After providing Emotional First Aid it's important for the helper to ask himself: *"what did I do right?"* and *"what would have happened if I weren't there with the survivor?"* It's also important to remember that you did what was most important for the survivor – you were there with him.

F. Be Aware of Insights and Appreciations Gained in Helping the Survivor of Tragedy

You will most likely come away from helping a survivor of tragedy with new or renewed insights and appreciations. These insights and appreciation may include an appreciation for the fragility of life; an insight about how strong human beings are; or an appreciation for the loved ones in your own life. It's important to act on these insights and appreciations. That action may involve hugging your kids; taking the vacation you put off; or putting in the fire alarm you've been planning to install.

G. Take Steps to Regain a Sense of Safety

At times, being involved in helping a survivor will "rattle" the helper's own sense of safety. For example, if the tragedy involved a drowning the helper may fear for the safety of her own children, or if the tragic event involved a home invasion, the helper may feel less secure in his own home.

The best way to regain a sense of safety is to take action. That action may involve reviewing your pool safety plan or installing a burglar alarm in your home.

H. Care for Yourself Physically

After providing Emotional First Aid it's important to exercise and to avoid alcohol.

In short, providing Emotional First Aid to a survivor of a tragic event is usually an uplifting experience for the helper. However, depending on the circumstances (closeness of the helper to the survivor; suddenness of the tragedy; similarities between survivor and helper; how "close to home" the event was for the survivor. .), the tragic event may "get to" the helper. The helper may feel helpless; the helper may feel afraid for the safety of his own family; or the helper may experience internal feelings of sadness or anger. In these cases, the helper should make a conscious effort to care for himself in the ways mentioned above.