



Alabama-West Florida Conference

Disaster Response Te

Seven Important Things to Know About Disaster Spiritual and Emotional Care

Tips for Early Response Teams

1) We are guests in the homes of those we help.

- We represent Christ's church and agree to uphold the highest standards of Christian witness and the trust placed in the United Methodist Church.
- We behave as we would when invited to anyone's home.
- Remember that cultural and regional customs differ.

2) Be very aware of your own behavior, including the volume of your speech or laughter.

- Laughter or loud talk may seem appropriate for the conversations you are having in one part of the site but very inappropriate for others at the site who are hurting and may hear you.

3) Confidentiality is vital to providing a sense of emotional and spiritual safety for survivors.

- By agreeing to volunteer on an ERT, you agree to hold the stories about disaster survivors with complete respect for the survivors. While this means that some of the most compelling stories you encounter must be held in confidence, we must not re-victimize survivors by sharing sensitive information or information that will identify the survivors. An exception may be made if survivors offer specific permission to tell their stories but those stories must still be handled with care. If you tell a story, it is important to state that the survivors asked you to share their story.
- It can be very difficult for people to ask for help. You may know people and families that you help. Golden rule: How would you want to be treated if you were asking for help?
- You may see behavior that is upsetting or disturbing. At an appropriate time, you may be invited to debrief your experiences in a formal, closed and confidential setting endorsed by your disaster response coordinator.
- Important exception: If you encounter someone who threatens to harm themselves or someone else or if you suspect a child, youth or vulnerable adult is being abused or neglected, you are required to report that to the proper officials. You are still required to refrain from telling this information to others in the community.

4) Don't make any promises.

- Don't imply any help for survivors unless you know that you *personally* can provide that help *immediately*. For example:
 - You probably *do* know that you personally and immediately can offer survivors the help you are offering at that moment (muck out, tarping, etc.) or a phone number where they can call for more information.

- You probably do **not** know that you personally and immediately can provide help for survivors such as donations, financial assistance, etc.

5) When in doubt, REFER.

- If you are concerned about someone’s behavior or emotional state, contact the mental health resources designated by the conference disaster response officials. Know who you would call before you enter the site.

6) Our ministry here is primarily a ministry of presence.

- They will know we are Christians by our love. Religious or faith talk is appropriate if the survivor initiates the conversation.
- Be aware that you may encounter persons from other faiths. Ask yourself, “Would I want someone of another faith to try to impose their beliefs upon me – especially if I had just been severely traumatized?”

7) Other important “Things to Say” and “Things NOT to say”...

- Know that survivors may say things that are disturbing— Our job at this time is to support survivors by listening, accepting intense emotions and validating feelings. (Validating feelings isn’t the same as agreeing with them.) It is not our job to correct or give advice.
- Don’t criticize expressions of grief; there is no such thing as an abnormal expression of grief. Survivors may blame themselves when there doesn’t appear to be any reason to do so, but imposing our values on others by chastising them for the way they feel will not help.

Things to Say when working with disaster survivors

“I am so very sorry” or “I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

“My heart is with you”

“You will be in my prayers” or “My prayers are with you”

“I can see this is hard for you.”

“I can see how you might feel that way.”

Things NOT to say when working with disaster survivors

“It’ll take time, but you’ll get over it.”

“Try to be strong for your children.”

“It was God’s will.” or “This was meant to happen.” or “There was a reason for this.”

“You’re lucky it wasn’t worse” or “It could have been worse” or “It was *just stuff* that you lost.”

“You can always have another child.”

“You’re still young-- you’ll find someone else.”

“This will make you stronger.” Or “Don’t cry.”

“Try not to think about it.”

“You should hear what happened to me.”

“God needed them more than we did.”

“It’s time to move on.”

“You shouldn’t feel this way.”

“I know how you feel.” (Don’t try to tell them that you understand or that you know how they feel. You do not. Even if you have been a disaster victim yourself, each person’s loss is unique.)

You are truly God’s instruments of healing and hope. THANK YOU!