

Mental Well-Being During Emergencies

While it is important to physically prepare for emergencies, it is also important to know how to manage mental well-being during emergencies.

What You Might Expect from Those You Support

Emergencies can be extremely stressful, especially for people with communication differences such as individuals with developmental disabilities. Here are some ways that people may respond to emergencies:

- Physical symptoms, like shaking, headaches, or feeling tired
- Crying, sadness, or a depressed mood
- Anxiety, fear, or worry that something really bad is going to happen
- Jumpiness
- Insomnia or nightmares
- Irritability or anger
- Survivor guilt or feeling shame
- Confusion or disorientation: not remembering their name or where they are
- Appearing withdrawn, not moving, speaking, or responding to others
- Not being able to care for themselves: not eating or drinking, or loss of ability to make simple decisions



Refusing to Evacuate

If an emergency requires you and those you support to evacuate a building or involves other kinds of unwelcome change, people may not feel ready, able, or willing to follow instructions. These concerns may be addressed with the assistance of other support team members or by contacting your vendor administration.

How You Can Help

As a direct support professional (DSP), you play an important role in helping the individuals you support. During an emergency, you can help them adjust as they react and process their changing emotions.

Psychological first aid, or offering immediate support to an individual during a time of distress, can be as important as physical first aid. These three steps can help you address the individual's immediate needs and connect them with support.

- 1. Look:** Check for the individual's safety. Does the person have obvious urgent basic needs? Is the person having a serious distress reaction?
- 2. Listen:** Approach the person who may need support and ask about their needs and concerns. Listen to them and help them feel calm.
- 3. Link:** Connect the person with loved ones. Upon the individual's request, give them information about the crisis event and refer them to supportive services when available.

Dealing with Communication Challenges

Individuals you support may have trouble communicating during an emergency. You can assist them by:

- Speaking slowly
- Giving step-by-step directions
- Using plain and honest language
- Allowing more time for the person to respond to a question



Do:

- ✓ Be honest and patient
- ✓ Make it clear that even if they refuse help now, they can get help in the future
- ✓ Find a quiet place to talk, and minimize outside distraction
- ✓ Respect people's right to make their own decisions
- ✓ Respect the privacy of communications whenever possible
- ✓ Give information, but keep it simple and understandable

Don't:

- ✗ Don't make false promises or force help on an individual when it is refused
- ✗ Don't pressure an individual to tell their story, interrupt them, or rush their story
- ✗ Don't make up any information you don't know
- ✗ Don't use terms that are too technical
- ✗ Don't use negative terms when describing the behavior of individuals

Take Care of Yourself!

As a DSP, you may be called to help those you support during an emergency. Do not forget to care for yourself as well! You are not alone if you have experienced **caregiver stress**. Caregiver stress can be managed by:

- *Accepting help from others:* A friend may offer to make you dinner or shop for your groceries
- *Focusing on what you can do:* No one can do everything well; sometimes you can't fix everything quickly
- *Setting realistic goals:* Break big tasks into smaller steps and prioritize your responsibilities
- *Getting connected with support:* Contact online caregiver resources, locate a support group, or talk to your doctor, friends, and family

Learn More

- About Psychological First Aid: <https://disaster-relief.org/pdf/psychological-first-aid.pdf>
- Speaking to individuals with disabilities as a first responder: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmJX3c43szg>
- Mayo Clinic on Caregiver Stress: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/caregiver-stress/art-20044784>