

Guidance for Health and Support Staff: Supporting people after a disaster.

Tips for responding to Post-Trauma distress, anxiety etc.

1. Key messages:
 - a. Normalise distress, anxiety, and other emotional reactions; promote coping
 - b. Factsheets: <http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/indexmh/coping-with-stress-factsheets>
2. The principles of *Psychological First Aid* provide a good framework for response - our role as health professionals is to promote:
 - a. Safety – being in a safe place, getting basic needs met.
 - b. Calm – reassure, offer a listening ear, normalise the range of emotions experienced.
 - c. Connectedness – encourage people to remain in touch with others, to reach out for support from family/friends.
 - d. Self-Efficacy – encourage keeping to usual routines, being physically active, practicing usual coping strategies and self care – provide information re stress and coping, reassure re emotional responses experienced.
 - e. Help – provide information re services available, where required assist with linkage to these services – give 1737 free text and phone counselling 27/7 info.
 - f. Hope – reassure people that they will recover, and that help is available if needed.
3. In the aftermath of disaster, people may experience a bewildering range of emotional responses, which can come unpredictably, and feel alarming – detachment/numbness, being tearful, anxiety, being jumpy/hypervigilant, flashbacks, anger, irritability. *Education re post-trauma responses, and reassurance that these are all normal reactions and will pass with time, is critical.*
4. Provide a listening ear, if the person wants to talk allow them to, but do not push them to talk.
5. As with any severe stress, this can also manifest as physical symptoms – breathlessness, chest tightness, dizziness, GI upset, etc.
6. Teaching people slow abdominal breathing (see below) is a simple helpful strategy to reduce the somatic symptoms associated with stress/distress, as well as anxious mood state (see attached).
7. Avoid use of alcohol and/or drugs as a coping strategy – in general this will tend to make things worse not better.
8. Where distress is extreme (e.g. associated with grief due to loss of a loved one), or persists, early referral for post-trauma counseling is important.

9. Although best avoided, for people who are struggling to function (e.g., severe sleep disturbance) short term (up to 1 week) prescribing of a hypnotic or anxiolytic may be warranted.

Instructions in slow abdominal breathing

In times of stress, it is common for people to hyperventilate – breathing which is shallow and faster. However hyperventilation then causes a range of alarming physical symptoms – breathlessness, chest tightness, dizziness, numbness/tingling in lips and fingers/toes – which provoke anxiety. Hyperventilating is the commonest trigger of actual panic attacks, but can be reversed by learning to breathe properly. Practicing slow abdominal breathing is a powerful tool to reverse hyperventilation, reduce anxiety, and promote calmness.

1. Sit or lie in a quiet place, close your eyes, notice your breathing – does it feel relaxed, or are you feeling a bit breathless?
2. Place one hand on your tummy over your navel, the other on your chest – notice when you breathe in, whether your chest/shoulders mainly move (suggests hyperventilation), or your tummy (this is healthier breathing)
3. NOW – breathe out, and begin your slow breathing relaxation:
 - a. Breathe in through your nose to the count of 5, breathing in such a way that the hand on your tummy rises;
 - b. Then hold your breath to the count of 3.
 - c. Then breathe out through your mouth to the count of 5 – and while you do this, let all the stress in your body go, imagine you are breathing it all out.
 - d. Repeat this for 10 minutes, or as long as practical.
 - e. If it is difficult to breathe into your tummy, then placing a light magazine on your tummy, putting your hands above your head, and focusing on raising the magazine as you breathe in, may work better.
 - f. If you initially feel breathless doing this – persist, it is a sign of hyperventilation, and if you persist it will pass and you will notice that once it does, you feel much calmer and more relaxed.
4. Now – having done this, it is helpful to practice at least twice a day, to get good at abdominal breathing. When you notice yourself feeling anxious or tense, you will be able to “switch” into abdominal breathing and reverse that, feel more relaxed.

*Special thanks to the team at 1737 for making these resources available.