

Responding to Disaster Victims

Validation: "This is an awful (tragic, heartbreaking, horrible, overwhelming, etc.) event (situation, tragedy, accident, disaster, etc.)." Validation helps people come to terms with the extent of what's happened and is comforting.

Empathy: "I hear/see your distress (stress, fear, anger, frustration, sadness, grief, shock, etc.)."

This acknowledgement is a way of accompanying someone through a tragedy and lets them know you recognize how they feel. A word of caution – don't say you *understand* if you haven't been through the exact same thing, and if you have, don't focus on your own war story. Stay present with them.

Specific Support: "I'm here to listen" "Can I help you pull carpet (pull sheetrock, wash clothing, etc.)" "Can I bring you water (bleach, food, coffee, etc.)" or "How about if I charge your phone for you (bring your work crew lunch, bring you FEMA forms, etc.)." Offer concrete things that fit the situation and that you are able to do.

For people who appear to be struggling to cope: "I know someone (a counselor, pastor, organization, program, etc.) who can help you get through this, can I give you their information (call them for you, take you there, bring them here, etc.)."

How NOT to Respond

"You're alive, that's what counts" or "At least you weren't hurt or killed." This is true, but it minimizes and invalidates their feelings of loss or grief. It IS ok to say "I'm glad you survived" or "I'm thankful you didn't get hurt."

"Let me know if there is anything I can do," or "What can I do to help?" When someone is dealing with disaster it can be difficult to know where to start or what you need. Be specific in your offer of what you can do for someone.

"This is just stuff, it can be replaced." While this is rational, it discounts the connections or memories or work put into obtaining the things the person lost. Just say "I'm sorry you lost your possession (home, car, etc.)."

"Look on the bright side" or "Good things will come of this". There is often growth or silver linings to tragedies, but it is important to allow people to come see those things *in their own time* as they process what has happened.

"Well you should have evacuated (moved your car, protected your house, lived somewhere else, etc.)" This implies that it's that person's fault they are in a disaster. No one wants to be a victim of disaster. It's not your place to decide what they should have done, and it's not supportive or constructive.

"You shouldn't be so upset" or "Suck it up and deal with this" or "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." It takes time for people to move from reaction to coping, and everyone is different in how they navigate crisis. Advising them to suppress their reaction will prolong their recovery.