ELEMENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID

by:

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One of the initial responses of people working in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery is Psychological First Aid. This is an approach for those who are affected by an emergency, disaster, or a traumatic event.

Psychological first aid is defined as a humane supportive response to a fellow human being who is suffering and who may need support. This kind of approach includes the basic principles of support to promote the natural recovery of an individual. It also aims to reduce the distress experienced by an individual and to promote flexible coping strategies that will allow the individual to adjust to the change of their environment.

Psychological first aid is different from critical-stress debriefing, counseling, and diagnosis and treatment. This approach does not require the first-aider to obtain the traumatic details they experience as it may have negative consequences.

This approach is not only done by professionals. Teachers and volunteers can conduct psychological first aid as long as they are equipped with proper training. The basic elements of psychological first aid are to promote safety, calm, connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope.

#1. Promote safety.

Promoting safety is done by providing physical and emotional comfort. It can be by relocating the individual to a safe place away from or to reduce exposure to the threat of harm. Providing them food, water, shelter, medical, or other material needs for
living. Responder can also assist by providing repeated, simple, and accurate information on how to get these basic needs met.

#2. Promote calm.

After a traumatic experience, an individual can feel overwhelmed and disoriented. First-aiders should stabilize them by providing a calm environment, away from stressful situations and/or exposure to sights, sounds, and smell of the emergency.

First-aiders should listen to the individual's stories, without forcing them to talk. Be friendly and compassionate even if people are being difficult. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel.

First-aiders can offer accurate information about relief efforts to help individuals understand their current situation. Moreover, assure them that help and services are available for them. They can provide information on stress and coping strategies.

#3. Promote connectedness.

Help individuals reconnect with their families and friends. They are the support people the individual need. First-aiders can offer practical help to people to address their immediate needs and concerns, and link them to different agencies available to meet their needs. Help is always needed regardless of culture, age, and/or religion.

#4. Promote self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is the belief that one's actions are likely to lead to positive outcomes and feeling able to help oneself. People under distress are likely to have low self-efficacy and it is the first-aiders' responsibility to engage them in meeting their own needs by assisting them with decision-making, helping them prioritize problems, and solve them.
#5. Promote hope.

Hope is lost to most of the affected people. Thus, first-aiders must convey expectancy that these people will recover. They just need to be there and always be willing to help. They should reassure these individuals that what they are feeling is normal.

After giving psychological first aid to those people in need, the first-aider should also do self-care, check themselves if they are still physically, emotionally, and mentally sound. Check-in with fellow helpers to support each other.

References:

Australian Psychological Society. Psychological First Aid: An Australian guide to supporting people affected by disaster. 2013