



Psychological Support

Practical Guide

2023

Anyone can find themselves vulnerable in the face of emergencies. Therefore, psychologists from the Ministry for Civil Defence, Emergencies and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters (EMERCOM) of Russia decided to share simple and effective action principles of psychological support that can help you and your loved ones in a crisis situation.

is a set of basic principles that allow people with no special training to help themselves and others cope with distress.

A person affected by an emergency experiences a strong emotional shock as their normal life has changed in an instant.

And it is not always possible for them to cope with the overwhelming feelings of fear, anger, resentment, anxiety, hopelessness and acute sense of loss on their own. That is why it is so important to support them and help find strength and courage to keep going.

Intention to help

The desire to help others is natural for humans. Getting support at the right time can help a person cope with the most terrifying events in their life. A person affected by an emergency especially needs psychological help and support.

NECESSARY ACTIONS

Remember: a person may need medical assistance!



Make sure that a person is not physically injured.
Administer first aid. If necessary, call a doctor or an ambulance.

Take care of your own safety.

Respect the person you are trying to help, their emotional state, values and the right to react to a crisis the way they do.

Consider your own mental and physical state before you decide to help others.

Use only the techniques you are sure will help and not do any harm.



ACTIONS TO AVOID



Do not try to help a person if you are not sure of your safety.



Do not overestimate your own abilities and, if necessary, seek help from specialists.



Do not try to help a person if you don't feel ready, are scared or feel uncomfortable talking to them. Remember it is a normal reaction, and you have every right to feel this way. A person can always tell if you are being sincere by your posture, gestures and intonation. Forcing yourself to help a person will not be effective.



Do not lie or give false hopes to a person. Do not manipulate a person and use the situation to gain benefits.

HYSTERIA

Hysteria

is an energy-consuming behavioural response of a person. They can scream, wave their arms and cry at the same time. Hysteria always occurs in the presence of group of people.

Hysteria is one of the ways our psyche responds to extreme events that have occurred. This reaction is not only energy-consuming but also contagious.



PROVIDING FIRST AID



Try to remove onlookers and draw attention of a victim to yourself. The fewer people there are, the faster a victim can calm down.

In case it is impossible to remove onlookers, try to be the one who pays more attention and listens actively. Support a person in distress, nod and affirm what they say.

When talking, address a person by their name and try to use short, simple phrases and fewer words.

When you do not further trigger a person by talking too much, they start to feel better in 10–15 minutes.

After hysteria is over, a person can feel exhausted, so it is important to give them an opportunity to rest.

SELF HELP



It can be very difficult to support oneself in such a state: you are emotionally unstable and may not understand what is happening around.



If you are starting to think about how to stop hysteria, it is already the first step towards doing that.

In this case, the following actions can be taken: go away from onlookers and find a place where you can be alone.



Splash your face with cold water. This will help you to regain your composure.

Do breathing exercises: inhale, hold your breath for 1–2 seconds, slowly exhale through your nose, hold your breath for 1–2 seconds, slowly inhale. Continue doing so until you manage to calm down.

ACTIONS TO AVOID



Do not do unexpected things such as slapping a person, splashing water on their face or shaking them.



Do not engage in an active dialogue with a person regarding their statements, and do not argue with them until they calm down.



Do not assume that a person is doing this on purpose just to draw attention to themselves.



Avoid saying cliches: "*calm down*", "*pull yourself together*", "*Stop (crying and so on)*".

Remember hysteria is a normal response to abnormal circumstances.

AGGRESSIVE REACTION

Aggressive reaction or outrage, anger

Outrage, anger are an energy-consuming reaction that can be expressed verbally (a person uses threatening language) and non-verbally (a person engages in aggressive actions).

An extreme situation is one in which the usual way of life is suddenly disrupted, so anyone has the right to feel anger, outrage, and irritation.

In this situation, you can help a person combat emotional overload, cope with their anger and face life challenges with dignity.

Outrage is even more emotionally contagious than hysteria. If not managed in time, it can eventually become widespread. Many people who experienced such a reaction later wondered how it could have happened to them.

PROVIDING FIRST AID

Outrage can be very dangerous for a person experiencing it, for you and for others around you. Make sure that all safety measures have been taken.



When talking to an aggressive person, speak quieter, slower and calmer than they do, gradually lowering your vocal tone and pace of speech. Address a person by name, ask questions that would help them to understand what they should do in the situation: *"Jane, what do you think we should do first: talk to a doctor or call your loved ones?"*

To support someone, acknowledge their feelings and understand that their reaction is not directed at you or those around them, but at the situation.

SELF HELP

Try talking to someone about your feelings; name them and point out the reason: *"I'm angry because I don't know what to do next"*.



Take a pause: slowly count to 10, focus on your breathing, and take a few slow, deep breaths. Clench and release the fists a few times. Find any object and focus on it.
Do some physical activity.

Avoid making important decisions until you calm down.

ACTIONS TO AVOID



Do not assume that a person expressing aggression is evil by nature. Outrage is a normal reaction to abnormal circumstances; it is how a person expresses their emotional pain.



Do not try to argue with the person or convince them they are wrong, even if you believe they are.



Do not threaten or intimidate them.



APATHY

Apathy

is a reaction characterized by a decrease in overall emotional, behavioral, and intellectual activity.

Often when a person is affected by an emergency, the emotional impact can be so overwhelming that they are unable to immediately comprehend what has happened, and in this case apathy acts as psychological anesthesia.



PROVIDING FIRST AID

If possible, allow this reaction to happen, and try to create conditions where the person can rest. When we allow the reaction to take place, it helps a person process the event in a way that is best for them.



If for some reason it is not possible, try to help a person exit this state. You can suggest them self-massage of the biologically active zones (earlobes and fingers) or help them with this.

You can give them a glass of sweet tea or suggest they do moderate physical activity (a walk, or doing a few simple exercises).



Talk to a person, ask them a few simple questions based on whether you know each other: "What's your name?", "Are you OK?".

People are often frightened by the state of apathy as they feel that they should be experiencing more intense emotions. Try to talk to them about their feelings and reassure them that it's completely normal to react that way under such circumstances.

SELF HELP

If you feel exhausted or find it difficult to get yourself together and start doing something, or especially if you feel emotionally numb, you should take rest. Take off your shoes, get comfortable and try to relax.



Do not abuse caffeinated beverages such as coffee, strong tea, energy drinks as it will only worsen your condition. If possible, take as much rest as you need.

If a situation demands your action, take a short rest by relaxing for at least 15–20 minutes.

Massage the earlobes and fingers as they have a lot of biological active zones. This massage will help you feel refreshed.

Have a cup of weak sweet tea.

Do some physical exercises slowly.



After that proceed with the tasks that need to be done.

Work at a moderate pace and try to save your energy. For example, if you need to get to a certain place, don't run — walk instead.

Avoid multitasking. Attention is scattered in this state, and you can find it difficult to concentrate on multiple things at once.

ACTIONS TO AVOID



Do not force an affected person to stop feeling the way they do and do not interfere with their coping mechanisms unless absolutely necessary.

Do not persuade an affected person to get together or snap out of it by appealing to moral norms, do not tell them “stop doing it”, “get a grip on yourself”.

FEAR

Fear

Fear is an emotion that keeps us safe from doing something risky and dangerous and every person experiences it from time to time.

Fear becomes dangerous when it is unjustified i.e. a person fears something that does not pose risk to them. Besides, fear is dangerous when it is so strong that a person has difficulty thinking clearly or acting.

An extreme situation is so named because it goes beyond the normal human experience and therefore strong fear is also a normal response to abnormal circumstances.

Having appeared once, fear may haunt a person for a long time. Then it will hinder the person's life by forcing them to give up some actions or their relationships.

The longer a person lives with their fear, the more complicated it becomes to deal with it. Therefore, the faster a person fights their fear, the less likely it is that this emotion that appeared as a response to abnormal circumstances will become a problem that will disturb them for many years.

PROVIDING FIRST AID

Do not leave an affected person on their own as fear is difficult to deal without help.



If fear seems to be so overwhelming as to paralyse an affected person, you can recommend them doing some simple exercises. For example, hold your breath for as long as possible and then focus on quiet and slow breathing.



Another technique factors in fear being an emotion and any emotion subsides if you start thinking. For example, you can suggest an affected person do some simple calculations such as serial subtraction by 7 from 100.

Once fear begins to fade away, you should talk to the person about the source of their fear, but do it carefully and allow them to speak their mind without aggravating their condition.



You should assure them that fear in this or that situation is completely normal. Such conversations allow an affected person to share their feelings rather than worsen their condition further.

Scientists have long proved that whenever a person talks about their fear it contributes to fear reduction. Therefore, if a person talks about something that stirs fear in them, you should encourage them and keep the conversation going.

SELF HELP



When you find yourself unable to think clearly or act due to fear, or you feel an oncoming panic attack, resort to the following simple techniques: focus on your breathing by taking even and slow breaths and saying to yourself “breathe in – breathe out” or counting, focus your attention on some random object i.e. count trees outside your window or try to concentrate on second-hand of a watch/clock or do something simple such as washing your dishes or playing an easy game on your smartphone. When we shift our attention to some object or action, our fear will subside.

Try to think to yourself and then talk about something that causes fear.

If possible, you might want to share your feelings with people around as expressing your fear will help you cope with it.

ACTIONS TO AVOID



Even if you believe that someone’s fear is irrational or absurd, do not try to prove otherwise saying things like: “*don’t think about it*”, “*that’s nothing*”, “*it’s a trifle*”. When an affected person experiences such condition, fear is serious and emotionally traumatic for them.

ANXIETY

Anxiety

Anxiety is different from fear in the fact that when a person is feeling fear, they fear something specific i.e. taking the subway, illness of their child, road accident etc. When a person experiences anxiety, they are not aware of the source of it. For that reason, anxiety is worse than fear in a sense.

The source of anxiety frequently lies in a lack of information and being in a state of uncertainty which is characteristic of any emergency situation.

Anxiety is one of conditions that can last for a long time draining a person's strength and energy, depriving them of rest and making them unable to act.

PROVIDING FIRST AID



In case of anxiety, it is essential to strike up a conversation with an affected person and find out what exactly is bothering them. A person will possibly realise where anxiety comes from so that it'll turn into fear. And fear is easier to cope with compared to anxiety.

Often a person may feel anxious if they lack information about current events. In this case you may consider what information to obtain, when and where it can be obtained, and develop a course of action.

The most distressing symptom of anxiety is the inability to relax. It is characterized by muscle tension, constant rumination so you can suggest that a person do some physical exercises to relieve tension or, better still, involve them in some useful activities that have to do with current events.

SELF HELP



Maintain your digital hygiene: receive information from one or several sources (2–3) that you trust, and do not obsessively check the news but take breaks.

Try to keep yourself involved into doing some useful day-to-day tasks.



Practise self-regulation techniques e.g. concentration, breathing exercises in order to relieve stress. Try to find the source of anxiety.

ACTIONS TO AVOID



Do not leave a person alone.



Do not convince a person that there is no point in being anxious especially if it is not true.



Do not keep back the truth about the bad news and the situation even if you believe that telling the truth may upset them.



CRYING

Crying

Crying is a natural response that allows us to express our overwhelming emotions during stressful situations.

When a person experiences emergency situation, they cannot miraculously get back to normal outright. They are overwhelmed with strong emotions, and crying in this case is a way to vent their feelings.

A person has to **LIVE THROUGH** any tragedy or loss. Living through means to accept what happened to us and based on it build a new way to see the world. This coping process does not happen in an instant as it takes some time. Emotionally, this process is very difficult for a person.

Crying, sadness, grief and retrospection indicate that a person is living through their problem. This reaction is the most correct one.

If a person holds back tears, it prevents them from venting their feelings which may harm their mental and physical health.

PROVIDING FIRST AID

You need to let a person cry if they want to. But being around a crying person and not trying to help them is wrong.

Try to express your support and sympathy to a person. You do not have to say anything as you can sit next to them, make them feel that you sympathise with them and feel empathy. You can just hold a person's hand, and sometimes an outstretched hand means a lot more than hundreds of words spoken.

It is important to give a person the opportunity to talk about their feelings.

If you see that a person is crying for a long time and it does not help them anymore, you can offer them a cup of water as it is a well-known and widely used remedy.

You can suggest that a person concentrate on taking deep and slow breaths and do some activity together with them.



SELF HELP



If you are crying, you do not have to try to calm down immediately like “pull yourself together”. You need to give yourself enough time and opportunity to cry.

However, if you feel that crying no longer helps and you should calm down, then you might want to have a glass of water and once done slowly but not deeply breathe concentrating on your breathing all along.

ACTIONS TO AVOID



You should not stop a person from crying, try to calm them down or convince them not to cry.



You should not think that tears are a sign of weakness.



“What doesn’t kill me, makes me stronger” — this aphorism of the German philosopher perfectly illustrates everything that is happening to a person who is living through psychological trauma. Crises after tragic events, mental anguish that people experience after losing a loved one is the price for being human. Someone can cope with this on their own while someone cannot. In this case, there is nothing disgraceful or embarrassing in seeking help from a specialist such as psychologist, a doctor or psychotherapist.

