Dealing with the emotions of victims

In a verbal or nonverbal way, volunteers should get this message across: “It’s okay for you to express your anger (or confusion, desperation, etc.). I will take it seriously.” This message can be conveyed by attentiveness and acceptance, by a soft, slow, calm tone and by calm, gentle movements. Your concern may be expressed by a relaxed but attentive posture, eye contact and a comfortable distance from the victim (not too close, but near enough for conversation).

Victims must be able to vent their emotions and allow their anger to flow away. Begin a relationship of mutual trust and caring, which is the basis for helping. You need to show you care enough to let the victim be expressive even if it is unpleasant for you.
This conveys your acceptance of the victim as an individual of worth and potential, which may be one of the biggest needs he or she has at the time. If you do that you will earn the right to help the person in need. If you are not able to provide adequate help, the right thing to do is to refer the person to someone who can. This may not be easy but you have made a move in the right direction.

**Emotional reactions to expect at each stage:**

- **Rescue or emergency phase** — Victim reactions during the rescue (emergency) phase will depend upon the severity of the disaster and their personal losses. Power and water service may be interrupted and landmarks destroyed or life may return to “business as usual.” People tend to repress emotion. They may work until they reach the point of exhaustion and go without sleep, adequate food or proper medical treatment. They feel they must protect and salvage what is left and try to recover what has been lost. People often report a feeling of need for self-preservation in order to assist other family members, protect property and salvage possessions. They tend to be friendly, talkative and want to share their experiences.

- **Rescue into relief** — During the relief phase volunteers and emergency personnel are on the scene. Victims begin to slow down and strong emotions may surface. Decision-making becomes more difficult and expectations for assistance may increase. Listening is critical at this stage.

- **Relief into recovery** — One to six months after a disaster many relief agencies and organizations will have left the community. Victims tend to be frustrated as fewer volunteers are on the scene. They feel they should be back in their homes.

Emotions can range from frustration to anger to pessimism to fault finding to depression because the victims begin to think they are forgotten and nobody cares.

**Respond by listening to emotions**

People whose lives are impacted by a disaster may feel as though they are not being heard. Your willingness to listen is just as important as the work that you do, in many cases, more important. You can do this verbally or nonverbally. Some of the nonverbal ways you can do this are tone of voice, eye contact and a relaxed, attentive posture.

This sharing allows the beginning of a relationship to form and is the beginning of mutual trust and caring. You are building a bridge. This trust is essential for effective help. People need to know that you genuinely care about them as individuals. There may be many relief organizations and agencies in and out of their lives during the coming months but you can show them that you are not there just to tear down, repair and build. You are there to share Christ’s love.
Tell Me About …

A simple way to start a conversation is to use these three words, “Tell me about …” Using those simple words, you can ask questions that allow the person to answer with ease and confidence and without a “yes” or “no” answer. Example: Tell me about your family (dog, car, home, illness, etc).

Listening to learn

➤ After a disaster, most people are at an emotional, spiritual and physical loss.
➤ Sustaining serious damage, losing your home or possessions, or the loss or injury of a loved one impairs rational thought processes.
➤ As “early responders,” LERT members work in devastated areas with impacted people that need to talk.
➤ It is best if each LERT has designated members who are trained to use directive listening techniques.

Victims often react emotionally rather than cognitively.
➤ Listen with open hearts and ears.
➤ Know that silence is golden.
➤ Use “tell me about …” training.
➤ Be sensitive to differences in culture, religion, color or language.

Listening is hard work

➤ Your full attention and focus are on the person speaking.
➤ Listening is an important way to show care. Giving your time and effort says to the other person that he or she is valuable to you.
➤ Listening to more than just words means noticing facial expressions, body language and tone of voice.
➤ Listening involves talking, too. Say just enough to demonstrate attention and encourage the other person.
➤ Listening also involves a response, such as asking appropriate questions. Ask open-ended and clarifying questions.
➤ Listening helps draw out the other person not to find solutions or smooth over a problem, but to allow him or her to share.
➤ Listening with patience and care helps the other person think through and discover possible solutions to his or her problems. Before you speak ask yourself:
   - Do my words offer Christian hope?
   - Do my words provide safety or security?
   - Do my words mitigate (lessen) future stress?
   - Will my words reduce symptoms of stress?
   - Will my words be comforting?
   - Will my words bring about a new normal?
➤ Listen more than you speak.
➤ Speak the truth.
➤ Keep your answers simple.
➤ Provide clarification.
➤ Communicate with your eyes and your heart.
➤ Do not promise anything you personally cannot deliver.
Lasting impressions

› This training does not make you a professional counselor.
› It will help you to be a better “listener.”
› Most listening encounters last less than a half hour.
› You will leave a lasting impression in a very short time.

Signs of grief seen in survivors

Feelings might include sadness, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, abandonment by God, emptiness, fatigue, helplessness, shock and disbelief, yearning for the way life used to be, relief that the survivor and loved ones survived, numbness and anger.

Physical reactions such as hollowness in the stomach, tightness in the chest and throat, over-sensitivity to noise, shortness of breath, weakness in the muscles, lack of energy and dry mouth might occur. The survivor might experience thoughts of confusion, preoccupation, despair or irrational thoughts.

Behaviors such as sleep disturbances (too much or too little), appetite disturbances (too much or too little), catching oneself wandering around, forgetting what you were doing, social withdrawal, restless over-activity, crying, suppressed crying, and dreaming about your trauma and loss are all normal.

Some grieving behaviors, however, signal unhealthy grief. The signs of complicated and unhealthy grief include:
› Ongoing exclusion of friends, family or activities;
› Prolonged feelings of emptiness and the worthlessness of life;
› Having thoughts of self-hurt or self destruction; and
› Abuse of alcohol, prescription or illegal drugs.

These are all signals that the individual needs help from someone experienced in helping people through crisis and loss. You should refer these people to a trained professional such as a pastor or counselor.

Building relationships

› Accepting: Accept the fact that you cannot completely understand the people or what they have been through. This is just a beginning so don’t become too frustrated with yourself.
› Being aware: Be aware that at times you may feel your own prejudices. You may become frustrated with the way things are or the way people behave. Don’t deny the feelings. Own them. Only then can you begin to understand the reasons behind them. Why are you frustrated? Being aware will help you grow in understanding of the differences.
› Listening: Listen more than you talk.
› Giving: Give of yourself. Take the initiative to reach out to the people whose lives were changed by a disaster. We often tend to shy away from getting involved in people's personal lives. In the proper context, take a risk and talk with people. Trust God to work through your words and actions.
› Enjoying: Enjoy the people and your time with them as much as possible. If you don’t take yourself too seriously, you won’t burn out as easily. Help create an environment in which people can share their struggles and laugh at themselves.