

Communicating with Difficult or Stressed Survivors



- PURPOSE:** How to communicate with a difficult or stressed survivor in a disaster situation.
- EQUIPMENT:** None
- ACTION:**
1. Review any information you have about the survivor in advance if possible.
 - Knowing if the survivor has any psychological issues such as depression or psychoses would be helpful
 - Find out if the patient has any family/caretakers available to assist
 2. Initiate contact in a calm, non-intrusive and respectful manner.
 - Consider cultural differences – be aware of body language, physical proximity and eye contact
 - Speak calmly and in a normal tone and give them your full attention
 - Use the patient’s full name to show respect
 3. Introduce yourself and describe your role.
 - Allow the patient to express his feelings and let him know you’re willing to listen
 - Ask simple questions that require simple answers – don’t interrupt; allow patient to tell his story
 - Maintain eye contact throughout the conversation and don’t correct mistakes
 4. Address immediate needs.
 - Reduce or eliminate environmental noises, keep the environment quiet and relaxed
 - Make sure survivor’s basic needs are met, i.e. hunger, thirst, warmth, or need for medical attention
 - Don’t make promises you cannot keep
 5. Watch for signs of escalating behavior, such as clenched jaw or fist, pacing, loud speech, flushed face
 - Respect personal space, keep two arms’ length away from patient
 - Don’t respond to insults; don’t argue. Offer choices i.e. “Would you like some help or us to call someone?”
 - Recognize patient’s wants and needs: “You seems angry ... do you want something you’re not getting?”