

# Initiating a Conversation with a Disaster Survivor



**PURPOSE:** To gather information about the survivors of a disaster, promote their comfort and safety, and protect their confidentiality.

**EQUIPMENT:**  None

- ACTION:**
1. Observe first before introducing yourself.
    - Decide who needs immediate assistance
    - Do not assume everyone in the area requires assistance
  2. Initiate contact in a non-intrusive, compassionate and helpful manner
    - Consider cultural differences – be aware of body language, physical proximity and eye contact
    - Speak calmly and softly and give them your full attention
  3. Introduce yourself and describe your role
    - Be respectful, don't use first names unless given permission
    - Get permission from the parents/caregivers before talking with children
    - Avoid hugging or touching unless it is clearly invited
  4. Address immediate needs
    - 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. Keep survivors' confidentiality
    - Keep information from one survivor to the next confidential
    - Seek out areas with as much privacy as possible when interviewing
    - Don't assume that all survivors want or need your help

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# Initiating a Conversation with a Disaster Survivor *continued*

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**ACTION:** Example of initial volunteer/survivor interaction:

*Volunteer notices young woman sitting on a cot in a shelter, appearing visibly upset in aftermath of tornado. Volunteer slowly approaches survivor, and bending down to her level, states, “Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a volunteer with the Kansas City Medical Reserve Corp. I’m checking with people to see how they are doing and to see if I can help in any way. Is it okay if I talk with you for a few minutes?” (Young woman nods) “Shall we go over to those chairs in the corner so we can have some privacy?”*

*Once in the more private area, the volunteer continues. “Before we get started, may I ask your name? Miss \_\_\_\_\_, would you like some bottled water or a glass of juice? Are you warm enough or did you get hurt in the storm?”*

*At that point, the volunteer would make sure the survivor’s physical needs were met, and then continue to interview the young woman.*

**REFERENCE:** “In the Know”, 2000; 2010 Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, The American Red Cross Good Body Mechanics, 2004