Initiating a Conversation with a Disaster Survivor

medical reserve corps
Greater Kansas City

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

continued ▶

Body Mechanics *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 I 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