



Disaster Mental Health
 Presentation prepared for Berkeley CERT
 July 15, 2023
 Instructor: Susan Snyder

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Welcome!

Please sign in.

Take a piece of paper & a marker.

Have a seat & get to know your neighbor by finding a few (not-obvious) things you have in common.

2

Before we dive in...

Let's take a breath.

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Disaster Mental Health

As CERT volunteers, we step into the world of first responders.

Studies of first responders show elevated risks for PTSD, depression, substance use, and death by suicide. Firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty.

Source: ["Suicide Among First Responders: A Call to Action" CDC NIOSH Blog, 4/6/21.](#)

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Disaster Mental Health

Learning Objectives

- 1. Traumatic Events & Mental Health Overview**
- 2. Personal Preparedness**
- 3. Stages of Disaster Response**
- 4. Common Responses to Trauma**
- 5. Responding to Acute Distress**

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Traumatic Events

A traumatic event is one that where experience overwhelms an individual's (or a community's) ability to cope.

Personal and community preparedness builds resilience for coping with and recovering from traumatic events.

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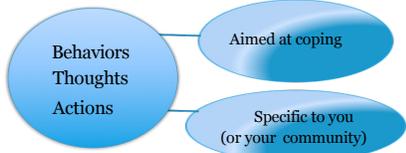
Resiliency is...

The ability to become strong, healthy, or successful again after something bad happens.

It means the ability to “bounce forward” after difficult experiences.

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Resiliency is...



A central blue circle contains the text "Behaviors Thoughts Actions". Two lines extend from this circle to two separate blue ovals. The top oval contains the text "Aimed at coping". The bottom oval contains the text "Specific to you (or your community)".

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Trauma Response

People respond to trauma in a highly individualized way.

There is a wide range of “normal” responses.

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Trauma Response



A diagram of a human brain with five callout boxes pointing to different areas. The boxes are labeled: "FIGHT" (top left), "FLIGHT" (top center), "FREEZE" (top right), "FAINT" (bottom left), and "FAWN" (bottom right).

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Trauma Response

The 3 Es

EVENT

- Intensity
- Duration

EXPERIENCE

- Previous traumatic incidence
- Personal circumstances during the event

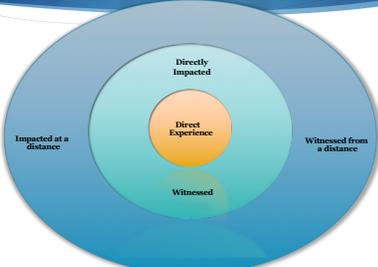
EFFECTS

- Impact both immediate and long-term

Source: SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach

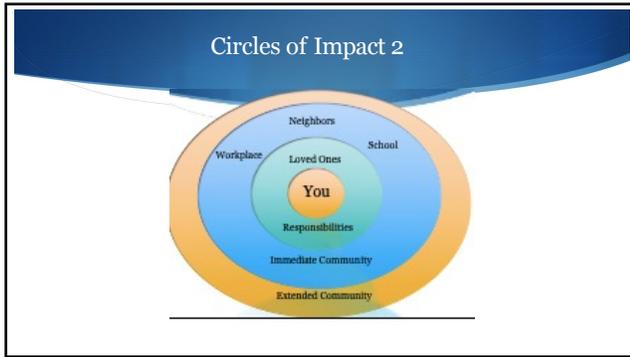
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Circles of Impact 1



A diagram showing four concentric circles. The innermost circle is orange and labeled "Direct Experience". The next ring is light blue and labeled "Witnessed". The next ring is medium blue and labeled "Impacted at a distance". The outermost ring is dark blue and labeled "Witnessed from a distance".

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Our CERT Mental Health Goals

- Safety
- Calmness
- Connectedness
- Self & Community Efficacy
- Hope

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AND (one more goal)...

Reduce the CHAOS!

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Preparedness to Reduce the Chaos

1. Identify & prepare for personal mental health needs
2. Bring your knowledge to CERT planning & response
3. Practice

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Personal Preparedness

Preparing mentally is as important as preparing physically.

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**Personal Preparedness
Mental Health "Grab & Go"**

What helps you in high stress situations?

How can you have this available to you during disaster response?

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ACTIVITY

Mental Health “Grab & Go” Kit

1. Each group has paper & markers
2. Draw an outline for the “kit” (bag/box/other)
3. Brainstorm and record in words or pictures all ideas for a MENTAL HEALTH grab & go kit
 - *be specific!*
 - items can be anything: breathing techniques, mantras, images, even physical objects IF they support mental wellness
 - include all the ideas

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Personal Preparedness

- Pre-identify your own stress signals & stress reduction tools
- Know yourself and your CERT teammates
- Be prepared to notice when stress reactions are interfering with your ability to be safe or compassionate.

Source: Dr. Elizabeth McMahon, presentation “Psychological First Aid” at the California for All CERT/LISTOS Conference, May 30, 2019

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Personal & CERT Preparedness includes:

- Cultural humility
- Create a supportive environment
- Reduce possible stressors
- Mentally prepare – thinking ahead to what could be distressing for us

Source: Dr. Elizabeth McMahon, presentation “Psychological First Aid” at the California for All CERT/LISTOS Conference, May 30, 2019

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Mentally Prepare

- Think ahead. Mentally prepare for what could go wrong and/or be most personally challenging or distressing.
- Do a ‘pre-mortem’ and plan how to cope.

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Mentally Prepare Example 1

Situation: I’m triaging and someone asks me to stay with them. I start to feel upset and stressed.

Response:

I Tell Myself: _____

I Do: _____

I Tell the Survivor: _____

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Mentally Prepare Example 2

Situation: I have to leave someone in danger.

Response:

I Tell Myself: _____

I Do: _____

I Tell the Survivor: _____

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Personal Worksheets to Mentally Prepare

- 1. Write down situations that may be challenging.**
What might you see, smell, or hear? What tasks or reactions may be upsetting or difficult?
- 2. Write how you can respond successfully.**
What might you say, think, or do? How will you handle upsetting feelings or situations?
- 3. Repeatedly read and imagine until you feel prepared.** If you hit a 6 or higher on the 0-10 Distress Scale (0 = none and 10 = extreme), stop and use stress reduction.

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Disaster Cycle



We can respond to mental health needs in all the stages **and** in all our different roles as CERT responders.

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Mental Health Initial Stages of Disaster Response

Use your mental health knowledge to support CERT

Role of adrenaline

Needs assessment → ALWAYS *rule out physical causes*

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The short and long term mental health impacts of disaster can be:

- Emotional**
- Physical**
- Cognitive**
- Behavioral**
- Existential**

These can show up immediately or be delayed for a significant amount of time.

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Video: Bonnie & Chip



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Video: Desiree & Family



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The short and long term mental health impacts of disaster can be:

Emotional
Physical
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Behavioral
Existential

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Listen
Protect
Connect

[Psychological
First Aid
ready.gov](#)

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Listen

convey interest, empathy & reassurance

- Hear what someone is saying and how they say it
- Notice what is not said
- Observe nonverbal cues & behaviors
- Note about their needs & concerns

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Listen

How to do it:

- Make the first move
- The role of silence
- Nonjudgmental stance
- Normalize responses
- Listen for what is working for them
- Be honest & trustworthy
- Check-in again (if this is realistic)

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Protect

reestablish feelings of safety (physical & emotional)

- Share honest information
- Offer ideas & connect to resources
- Maintain structure
- Reduce exposure (esp. media)
- Support through action & appreciation
- Share what is working
- Encourage positive coping

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Connect

restore & build connections

- Emotional & social isolation is a common trauma response
- Support community connections
- Assist with connections through social media & other resources
- Encourage reaching out (circles of impact)

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Listen, Protect, Connect

- In crisis, children, in particular, watch adult reactions
- Acknowledge your own distress AND demonstrate a positive, optimistic approach.
- Be overt about actions you are taking

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Listen, Protect, Connect

- Encourage a growth (problem-solving) mindset
- Share age-appropriate information to normalize stress reactions
- Teach specific coping skills (meditation, breathing)
- Find ways for people to be involved

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Acute Distress & Difficult Reactions

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Psychological First Aid

Needs Assessment: Signs of Acute Distress

- Disoriented or confused
- Unresponsive to verbal directions/questions
- Uncontrolled crying or hyperventilating
- Experiencing uncontrolled physical reaction (shaking, trembling)
- Reports "flashback"/believes the event is happening again
- Frantic, agitated or panicky
- Extremely withdrawn, apathetic, or "shutdown"
- Extremely irritable or angry
- Exceedingly worried

Always work to rule out physical causes

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Tools for Difficult Reactions

Five Common Difficult Reactions

1. Temporarily Overwhelmed/Dazed/Passive
2. Crying/Grieving
3. Worried
4. Panicking
5. Angry/Demanding

Developed by: Elizabeth McMahon, PhD & Susan Schmitz, MAIDP



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Overwhelmed/Dazed/Passive (1 of 2)

- Exude calm
- Use their name often
- Be supportive
 - "You can do this."
 - Help them refocus on what to do
- See the Need / Say the Need
 - Offer ways you can help

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Overwhelmed/Dazed/Passive (2 of 2)

- Use their name often
- Praise engagement or actions
 - “Yes. That’s right. Good.”
- Short, simple phrases with “and” & “because”
- Get them moving
- Focus on the present (Focusing/Grounding)

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Focusing/Grounding Skills

Focus on **you, breath, body, or outside self.**

You: Can you hear me? Look at me if you can hear me. I am here. Can you look at me? Good.

Breath: Breathe with me. Low & Slow. Count 4-4-4-4

Body: Feel your [uninjured body part], cloth, temperature, breeze, etc.

Outside: Look around. Find 3 things that have blue. What do you see? What object is blue?

5-4-3-2-1 See-Hear-Feel: Tell me 5 things you see; 5 things you hear; 5 things you feel. Now tell me 4 things....., 3 things...., 2 things...., 1 thing.

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Crying or Grieving

- No universal display of grief or grief trigger
- Crying is self-regulating, it does not have to be turned off
- When possible, provide privacy, listen, empathize, offer a comforting touch
- Avoid saying: “At least...” or “You should...”
- If you need them to do something:
 - “It’s ok to cry **and** right now we need you to go/do [] **because**”

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Worrying

“I can’t find [person, pet, thing].”

“When will [resources or helper] be here?”

“What if there’s an aftershock or tsunami?”

- Admit what is not known
- Don’t say “Everything will be OK.”
- Reassure about unrealistic worries
- Give them something to do

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Panic

- Exude calm (get calm and stay calm)
- Teach “4 for Calm” Breathing
 - “There is special breathing that will help. Will you breathe with me?” (7/15/23 tip from Toni: *exhale first*)
- “Focusing/Grounding” on you/surroundings
- Give facts: “Panic is time-limited. It will stop”
- “You’re having an adrenaline reaction. It’s going to go away.”
- No paper bags!

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Angry/Demanding (1 of 2)

- Anger is often an expression of another emotion
 - Pain, fear, threat, overwhelm, shame
- Do not take it personally!
- Approach safely
 - Leg length away, at an angle, able to move away
- Use Connect Skills: Tone, “I Help You”, See/Say the Need, Get a ‘Yes’

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Angry/Demanding (2 of 2)

- **Set the Tone: Safe, Calm, Caring, Competent**
 - Leg's length, at an angle, able to move away
 - Quiet voice: "Can you please speak more slowly? I want to help."
 - Move away from others (attend to everyone's safety)
- **See the Need. Say the Need.**
 - Emotions and what can be done
 - "I see how upset you are. It's understandable. This a very [difficult, frustrating, confusing, ...] situation."
- **Get a "Yes"**
 - "How can I help right now?"
- **Collaborate and emphasize what can be done**



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Review: Our CERT Mental Health Goals

Safety

Calmness

Connectedness

Self & Community Efficacy

Hope

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Review: Learning Objectives

1. **Traumatic Events & Mental Health Overview**
2. **Personal Preparedness**
Mental Health "Grab & Go" Kit
Mental Preparedness Worksheets/Scenarios
3. **Stages of Disaster Response**
4. **Common Responses to Trauma**
5. **Responding to Mental Health Issues**
Listen, Protect, Connect
Psychological First Aid (PFA) for Acute Distress/Difficult Reactions

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Disaster Mental Health

Thank you!

Listen, Protect and Connect: family to family, neighbor to neighbor was customized by Merritt Schreiber, Ph.D. and Robin Gurwitsch, Ph.D. for the County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Program.

Psychological First Aid (PFA) was developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and the National Center for PTSD, with contributions from individuals involved in disaster research and response.

Material from Dr. Elizabeth McMahon & SF NERT included with permission from Dr. McMahon. For more information see, <http://www.elizabeth-mcmahon.com>

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Questions? Contact susansnyder@berkeley.edu

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