



ADVANCING SCIENCE AND PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

For Friends and Family: Supporting Essential Workers in Extended Disasters or Public Health Crises

Support from close family members and friends can be crucial in fostering essential workers' ability to cope during disasters or public health crises that are long-lasting. The Stress First Aid framework provides some ways you can help.

Stress responses lie along a spectrum of severity. The Stress Continuum can help you communicate about experiences in an efficient way. You can ask your loved one what zone they think they are currently in. This can help you begin to identify ways to move them to less severe stress zones.

READY	REACTING	INJURED	ILL
<p>Circumstances: Well trained Supported</p> <p>Optimal functioning: At one's best In control Motivated</p>	<p>Circumstances: Responding to multiple stressors at work or home Double-edged sword vulnerabilities</p> <p>Mild and transient distress or impairment: Changes in mood Loss of motivation Loss of focus Physical changes</p>	<p>Circumstances: Strong or multiple stressors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma • Loss • Moral injury • Wear and tear <p>More severe or persistent distress or impairment: Loss of control No longer feeling like normal self</p>	<p>Circumstances: Unhealed orange zone stress Additional stress Risk factors</p> <p>Clinical mental disorder: Symptoms persist and worsen Severe distress Functional impairment</p>

There are five elements that research suggests are important to consider in responding to stress: **Check, Cover, Calm, Connect** and **Competence**. Here are some practical actions that you can take within each element to help a family member or friend deal with the stress they are feeling.

Check in regularly. Ask what would be supportive. Pay attention to signs of significant stress, such as loss of control of emotions, decreases in ability to function at work or home, changes in relationships, and increased drinking or drug use. You can check in by using the OSCAR strategy, which is a way to mention changes you have noticed in the person’s behavior if they say they’re “fine.” Here are some examples:

Observe. Watch for behavior patterns over the course of a week or so. Look for a quiet time to discuss what you’ve seen.

State your observations without interpretation: “I have noticed that you have been much less able to relax and connect with me or others.”

Clarify why you’re bringing this up: “As your wife/friend/parent, I really want you to spend time with me, but I also want to know what is making you have a hard time connecting, because I care about you.”

Ask them to give you their view of the observations: “Can you help me understand what’s going on with this?”

Respond to their reply with possible next steps. If they tell you that they are stressed, you can say something like: “Thank you for telling me. I can understand why you’d be feeling stressed right now. I’d like to help reduce your stress by trying to take some things off your plate right now. Would it help if I (_____)?”

Provide **Cover** by asking how the situation has harmed your loved one’s sense of safety, and ways they believe they can regain it. Then brainstorm and make plans to address those concerns. Do your best to be well-informed about information that can improve safety. Keep track of resources that might be helpful and ask people who have been through similar situations about safety strategies that have worked for them. Depending on the nature of your relationship, you can also help them feel safe with you by being tolerant of their stress reactions, respecting their values, ideals, and work duties, maintaining empathy and support, and adapting to their needs as much as possible.

“When he’s tired, he sometimes can’t find words to express what he is feeling, so I will give specific options, like, ‘are you feeling tense, numb or worried?’ I also watch his body language. When he is overly anxious, his legs bounce up and down when he’s sitting. If I suggest changing something about what is happening at that moment, he will agree.”

“I learned ways to reduce her concerns so we could avoid anxiety. We also talked about potential things that might happen, and how we would cover our needs. If she felt that her safety was compromised, I sat with her and did my best to be empathic and a calming presence. Trying to tell her she shouldn’t worry can make it worse. Sometimes you just have to close your mouth and let there be silence.”

Calm them or help them calm themselves. Remind them to keep calming activities in their schedule, even if it means switching to ones that take less time. Suggest problem-solving, exercise, taking a bath, or other calming activities. Give them opportunities to talk about what concerns them. Schedule calming activities that you can do together, if possible. Help them with practical concerns and keep a positive attitude as much as you can. If their negative self-talk is increasing their anxiety or agitation, suggest ways to counter it. [Helpful Thinking During the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Outbreak](#) has good strategies that can be useful in any disaster or public health crisis.

"I try to listen and find ways to help her reduce tension. Sometimes I remind her to use her preferred coping skills. Sometimes she may not want me to offer suggestions, she may just need to vent. I've learned to ask her if she wants this to be a venting conversation or a problem-solving conversation."

Connect with your loved one regularly, either by providing help with practical matters or simply by talking. If they want to talk about their feelings or experiences, try to be understanding. Help them sort through, identify, and make sense of their feelings. Try to keep neutral view and avoid saying anything that might be perceived as judgmental or critical. Remember that changes in their attitude, mood, or behavior are likely related to the stress they are experiencing, so be patient and tolerant. Encourage them to talk with mentors or coworkers who understand what they are experiencing. If you're in a family, create family activities that promote connection. Refer to [Tips for Providing Support to Others During the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Outbreak](#) for additional suggestions.

"He used to be an avid golfer, but he hasn't been able to do that lately and it's made him depressed. I have been trying to remind him that just because he can't play a full round of golf doesn't mean that he and I can't do similar things like hitting some balls into a net."

Foster their **Competence**, or capacity to endure through life's challenges and adversities. Organize your actions, discussions and activities around messages that let them know that you will get through this together, that your love is strong. Tell them that you will help them stay strong and healthy by tackling problems together, taking smaller steps when needed in order to keep moving forward. Let them know how proud you are of them. Remind them to use the skills that have worked for them in the past, pacing themselves to do what they can in each moment to get through the day. Remind them that they are part of something big and that they can depend on you.

"When he's is fatigued and frustrated by work, but still wants to contribute at home, I give him something to do, like brushing the dog, to give him something calming but that also contributes to our task list. I tell him it's okay to be frustrated that he can't do more at home but to remember he's part of something bigger. It's okay to take a break or change your pace. Let's not worry about home tasks as much now. Today we will not worry about that. Let's adjust our expectations and just do what we can."

Look for ways to increase their **Confidence**, self-esteem, hope, optimism, or faith. Communication with caring friends and family can make a big difference. Tell them or show them how they inspire

you, what you love about them, or what you are grateful for in them. If they are stuck in unhelpful thoughts or beliefs, try to help them gain a better perspective on how they view themselves or others. Ask them focus on what is going well, what they're grateful for, how they're getting through a difficult time, or how they can be inspired by what they see around them. Help them find meaning in their experiences. Highlight their strengths and core values.

When losses happen, find ways to make meaning, make sense of, and honor the loss. If religion, faith, or prayer are a source of comfort to them, encourage their use.

"I try to build his confidence up. I try to show him that his family is a mirror for all the good stuff he's done in the world. I try to keep him from dwelling on what sucks. When he feels guilt---'I could've done this or that,' I try to remind him who he is. I try to be as calm, non-judgmental, loving and supportive as possible. I do a lot of redirecting. There is not a lot you can do if you're bogged down."

"I break things down into small steps so she can see her accomplishments and not get overwhelmed. We look at it and talk [problems]. I remind her that she can accomplish things by taking small steps, and that it's okay to have feelings, but not to let them stop or control her for long. Most of the time that works."

Coordinate with other family members or friends if you need additional assistance. Find resources that might be helpful if you feel you are not able to provide them enough support on your own. Try reaching out to an old friend, family member, supportive mentor or coworker, or a mental health provider. If mental health assistance is needed, consider online or telehealth options for greater flexibility. It may help to interview providers before deciding on one to work with.

Watson, P., Gist, R., Taylor, V. Evlander, E., Leto, F., Martin, R., Vaught, D., Nash, W.P., Westphal, R., & Litz, B. (2013). Stress First Aid for Firefighters and Emergency Services Personnel. National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.