

Supporting affected community members: What to say and not say

Affected and evacuated community members may arrive at a relief or recovery centre seeking assistance. MSEVs should be assured it is normal to struggle with what to say or do in these instances.

Affected community members may present as being distressed, irritable or tearful. They may also present with no visible effect at all, appearing as if in shock. While the aim will be to eventually guide them to more appropriate services, the initial priority should be provide a sense of safety, protection and privacy.

The most important thing an MSEV can do at this time is be with them and listen.

What to avoid saying:

Everything happens for a reason (or variations on this): This is likely to come across as uncaring and judgmental. They are unlikely to be able to see a bigger picture, grasp the idea of fate or perceive a divine purpose even if they usually believe in these things and as a volunteer you will not necessarily know their usual belief system and cannot assume they share yours.

It will be OK / Everything will be alright: This is a promise that can't be kept. No-one will know if it is going to be OK for this person.

Calm down: The heightened level of anxiety they are experiencing is a natural, biological response to a dangerous situation. They will be buffeted by a range of stress hormones and neurological (brain) responses that cannot be controlled by thought or positive thinking.

I know how you feel: No-one, even someone who has experienced the same event or suffered a similar loss, will know how they feel. Their experience is individual and unique and whilst this comment is usually said to demonstrate empathy it actually come across as minimising the validity of the person's feelings.

What to say:

What you're feeling is common: They may believe they are 'going crazy' or be very worried they are unable to do things they usually find easy (eg even finding their way around their local town). It is very helpful to reassure them they are having a normal response to an abnormal situation.

What is most important for you right now? They may or may not be able to answer the question, but it will help them focus on the immediate and help the volunteer consider the best next step.

I can't explain why this has happened: Being open and honest is important and that includes acknowledging that we don't have insight into why the emergency has happened. In time they may make their own sense of why the event happened, or they may not.

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