



SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION: Independent Study

Special Topic:
Emotional Anchoring



Emotional anchoring is an approach to stabilizing an emotionally overwhelmed survivor. You will be able to identify an overwhelmed individual by a number of key indicators. Primarily, the visible signs of being overwhelmed are physical and behavioral. An emotionally overwhelmed individual may become withdrawn, quiet, unresponsive, or agitated and visibly distressed. You may find that they have difficulty focusing and may not hear or see individuals around them. Internally, the survivor may be experiencing anxiety, nervousness, depression, panic, or other distressing emotions. These emotions are common after a disaster, however you may find that, at times, these particular emotions become overwhelming to certain survivors. When the survivor has difficulty dealing with the distressing emotions and the stress of a disaster, they may begin to exhibit emotional overwhelm.

Approach to Overwhelmed Survivors

- Don't rush in. Stay calm.
- Appraise immediate needs and address concerns.
- Be present. Be empathic. Be respectful.
- Allow survivors to experience emotions on their terms.



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Since the survivors you are approaching are already overwhelmed by internal emotions, you do not want to physically overwhelm them as well. Approach the overwhelmed survivor slowly and calmly. If you have met the survivor previously, remind them of who you are and why you are talking to them. If you have not met them, introduce yourself and your role. One way to calm an individual is by addressing any immediate concerns or needs. Checking with the survivor to see if they need water or food will help build rapport and possibly help the survivor stabilize their own emotions. Remaining consistently calm, gentle, and relaxed serves to calm the individual by providing them an example and attempting to lower their distress by mere proximity.

Once you have attempted to engage the individual, you may find that they are able to readily communicate with you. Presence, empathy, and respect are key components to interacting with all survivors and will be exceptionally important when working with emotionally overwhelmed individuals. Part of this approach is to allow the survivor to experience emotions at their own pace and in their own way. When approaching emotionally overwhelmed survivors, do not force them to address their emotions if they are not ready to deal with them. It is important to give them space to experience their emotions on their own terms. If individuals are having difficulty communicating or calming themselves you may want to practice an emotional anchoring technique with them.

Facilitate “Emotional Anchoring”

- Speak calmly yet firmly.
- Model slow, deep breathing and guide the survivor to follow the pattern.
- Ask survivors to observe and name close-by objects they can see, hear, or feel that do not cause distress.
- Let survivors know you will remain supportive, nearby, and available.



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The above-listed actions are components to emotionally anchoring distressed individuals. Keep these in mind throughout your interaction with the survivor and while you read the following illustration.

Imagine you are in a Red Cross shelter following a hurricane. The survivors within the shelter have been evacuated from a nearby city where there has been massive damage and loss. Many of the individuals have experienced a loss of a loved one, loss of their home and/or property, and they are separated from their families. As you are talking to the survivors, an individual tells you they are worried about “Sally.” They tell you that she has become distant, did not participate in the evening meal and is rocking back and forth in a chair near the corner refusing to speak to anyone. As you approach Sally you recognize her and realize you helped her get a cot earlier in the day.

As you approach from her side, you bring a chair near her, sit and say: “Sally. Hi, it’s Sam. We met earlier today, I helped you grab a cot.”

She does not respond so you continue: “I wanted to come check in with you. Sally, can you hear me?”

You get a slight head nod. “Ok Sally, I want you to try breathing with me. Take a slow deep breath.” You model taking a slow deep breath (or 2 or 3 until she starts breathing with you). “Great Sally. Lets breath a little more together. Another slow, deep breath.”

After a couple of slow deep breaths together you say: “Now, I want you to try to name something nearby that’s not distressing. Can you do that for me? Name one thing you can see that is not distressing.”

There is a long pause, then Sally starts to look around. She states: “I see a bed.”

You respond: “Great. A bed. Can you name another thing you can see that’s not distressing?”

The pause is shorter: “I can see a child playing.”

You encourage her: “That’s great, a child playing. Can you name one more thing you can see?”

Sally is looking up more actively now and readily states: “There’s a person’s red bag on the floor.”

“Ok. Great, a red bag.” You respond, then pause slightly to keep the conversation slow and gentle.

“Sally, it seemed like things were a little overwhelming for you just now. Are you feeling a little better?”

You get a slight head nod and you continue: “I am going to give you a little time to yourself now.

Perhaps you want to take a few more slow deep breaths. If you would like to talk to me, I will be here until 9:00pm tonight. I’ll be in different areas of the shelter, but if you can’t find me you can go to the main desk and they will know where I am. Please come find me if you want. Does all that sound okay to you?”

Sally nods her head and you again state where she can go to get you and point out the station itself. Then you walk away.

**Please note that this is a more simple case and procedure than is common. Sometimes you will find that survivors will have a hard time calming themselves. For more information and possible strategies please see the resources below.*

Center for Addiction and Mental Health:

https://knowledgex.camh.net/amhspecialists/specialized_treatment/trauma_treatment/Documents/first_stage_trauma_143_147.pdf

Alan Kirwan: Guided Grounding Exercise: http://www.spiritube.com/alan-kirwan/guided-grounding-exercise-video_d71924720.html