

# Managing emotions in emergencies:

## For people working with affected communities

Emergencies pose threats to people, their property and environment. They are associated with uncertainty about the threat and what will keep them safe. In dangerous situations, uncertainty becomes a threat in itself and results in affected people becoming highly emotional.

### Emotional Arousal in Emergencies

Being under threat puts the body into an instinctive survival state. It increases chances of survival by mobilising reserves of physical, mental and emotional energy. This is a state of heightened arousal and activates whatever functions the person needs to survive. Awareness of threatening aspects of the environment are heightened at the expense of reassuring features or placing threats in context.

### Why People Become Anxious or Angry

High arousal causes bodily and mental tension that needs to be relieved. This is done in three ways:

1. Survival-oriented activity relieves tension by acting to reduce threat. An aroused person has increased energy, strength, perception, emotional toughness etc.
2. Tension may be changed into anxiety or fearfulness, with uncertainty, need for reassurance or guidance, tearfulness, trembling, lack of confidence, reliance on others, difficulty thinking clearly or making decisions. Anxiety undermines a person's sense of their competence. It is a threat in itself, keeps arousal up and leads to needs for reassurance that may not be available.
3. Tension may be released as anger. Anger is a survival emotion that increases certainty (often unrealistically) by finding a focus and assigning blame and responsibility. Since anger at natural forces, God or the weather is not effective, anger is directed to people with responsibility instead.

### Expressions of Anger

Aggression and anger avoid the disabling effects of anxiety and enhance short term survival by focussing on the threat. There is a search for someone to blame and take responsibility even if unrealistic. Simplistic

ideas of cause and effect, focussing on one aspect of a complex situation and assuming it could have turned out differently are used to justify anger and blame. Anxiety and anger often alternate in distressed people.

High emotion tends to swamp thinking, so arguing, giving facts and information, explaining why decisions were made are all ineffective. Angry people are more concerned to vent their anger than know facts. Anxious people want to find out what they do not know or get reassurance. Angry and anxious people may see rational discussion as avoidance, cover-up or ducking responsibility.

### Reducing Anger and Anxiety

Anxiety is reduced by reassurance and certainty about what is unknown. If people cannot be given information to reduce their anxiety, then any certainty that can be given will help. Information about assistance (accommodation, financial needs, communication with family) reduce arousal. Emotional support helps tolerate anxiety.

The angry person is focussed on the threat. They want action to satisfy their grievance. This is usually not possible and their understanding may not be objective. Do not give justifications or retaliate for unfair accusations. They further aggravate the anger, frustrate discharge of emotion and heighten tension, but do not reduce threat. Anger is reduced if either the threat is reduced or if emotion can be expressed with emotional support.

### Impact of Anger on Workers

No matter how well conversations with angry or anxious people are managed, anyone with concern for others and commitment to their job feels an impact. It is important to offload the anger absorbed to prevent it lingering or building up so you are not left with it. There may be many more before the emergency is over.

Describing what was unfair, insulting, worrying or evoked sympathy helps distance them from your own feelings; opportunities are needed to share it with colleagues involved who understand it best. Delayed reactions and cumulative stress reactions build up from a series of difficult interactions and need to be prevented. Support from colleagues who understand the work is the best assistance.

This is best delivered when organised by management as part of operational routine or arranged at the end of the shift as demobilisation or peer support sessions. If reactions linger a debriefing may enable the person to identify the reason and let it go.

## Interacting with Emotional People

Tension is relieved when angry or anxious people feel they are communicating their concerns. The first priority is to reduce the level of emotion by hearing the person out, allowing them to say freely what is on their mind. Receiving the information absorbs anxiety, anger and hostility.

Respect their worries, fears and grievances by saying so and by body language showing you are listening. Letting people talk is the best way for them to calm down and start thinking clearly. You help them without saying too much yourself.

### How to help:

- Looking directly at the person speaking to you
- Responding and nodding so they know you are listening
- Asking questions to make sure you understand them
- Avoiding interrupting or being rushed
- Finding out why a question is being asked before answering it
- Not judging or giving opinions, but letting them say what they want
- Making comments to show you are with them eg, agreeing, saying 'I see', 'OK', 'yes' etc.
- Showing their feelings of threat and anxiety are taken seriously eg, 'that must have been a very dangerous moment', 'it is terrible that has happened', 'I am sorry to hear that' etc.

### How not to help:

- Ordering people around or telling them to do things without explaining why
- Telling them they're lucky it wasn't worse; comparing their problem with others'
- Talking down to them, not listening, telling them what they should feel
- Reassuring them everything is all right when it isn't
- Taking their anger or emotions personally
- Getting emotional or frustrated with them

Very upset or anxious people may have come from dangerous situations and be in trauma; their arousal may be discharged through angry outbursts. They show this by needing to say the same thing repeatedly in different ways. They need it all listened to. If angry people keep talking, anger subsides.

## Managing Conversations with Emotional People

Supportive conversations with angry or anxious people have four stages.

1. Relieve tension by absorbing anger. Keep comments to a minimum, only say what is

required to keep communication going and show they are understood. Information cannot be absorbed in high anxiety or anger.

2. Engage with their concerns once they have told their story by asking for more details about their experience.
3. Provide information or explanations as they calm and agitation reduces as shown by them asking questions, seeking information or pausing to see what you will say. Give information in short sentences; use simple words or images; avoid scientific or technical jargon.
4. Conclude by offering an outcome. Say you will pass on the information they have given; enquire if you can be of further help; ensure they are aware of the other services available.

## Keeping Objective

It is difficult not to be affected by anger, become annoyed, hurt or impatient. Upset people need to release anger before they become more thoughtful in dealing with problems. Those who maintain blame do not recover well from emergencies. They cannot accept what has happened, but continue to look for redress from someone they hold to blame. Hostile responses to their anger justify these feelings. Early support to distressed people initiates recovery. Even if nothing can be done immediately, they are more likely to recover control if responded to supportively.

The following considerations reduce impact and help keep conversations constructive.

- **The anger is not directed at you personally; you only represent the organisation they blame.**
- Concentrate on observing the person being angry rather than feel personally attacked.
- Listen carefully to what they say so you can respond when they are ready.
- Do not make defensive comments eg, 'don't blame me', 'it wasn't my fault', and 'you're talking to the wrong person'. They prevent discharge of emotion and build tension.
- Show understanding by saying, 'I'm really sorry to hear that', 'that's awful', 'we'll have to see what can be done about that', 'what was the worst part of what happened for you?'
- Even if the person is angry at your agency, you can provide support to them.
- You do not have to defend your agency, although it may be necessary to explain. Not everything needs to be explained at once.
- **Say something like 'these are important issues I will talk to my managers about an opportunity to follow up,' or 'there is a lot you may not know, we must talk further about this'.**
- Indicate their concerns will be passed on and there will be opportunities for further discussion. Without opportunities for further resolution, anger will build up again preventing recovery.
- **Speak slowly, politely and quietly even if they are yelling; do not use their language, keep it rational and professional, preserve their dignity (often people feel embarrassed by their behaviour afterwards).**

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