



Dr. Shiri Daniels

The Power of Listening

Principles for Conducting a Supportive Conversation Following Crisis and Disaster Events

Dr. Shiri Daniels*

Crisis and disaster events can evoke overwhelming emotions: anxiety, anger, uncertainty, helplessness, and a sense of threat to our basic safety and security. In addition, for some the events may provoke earlier traumatic memories from a similar situation and/or intensify preexisting emotional difficulties. Crisis events undermine the sense that we have control over our lives, harm social resilience, and raise levels of anxiety and emotional distress among all of us: children, youth, and adults alike. At times, the emotional overload can paralyze us, leading us to close ourselves off and avoid contact with others. However, talking about our most difficult fears and disturbing thoughts can bring a great sense of relief during times of emotional distress.

Helping the helpers: It is highly recommended that all helpers who have a conversation following traumatic events and stress only do so after they themselves have had a conversation about their own feelings with a figure who is significant for them. The conversation should include the opportunity to vent emotions and raise awareness of the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences of the event on the helper. We must identify our personal coping patterns and ask ourselves: When I am dealing with emotional distress, what makes it easier for me? What makes it difficult for me? How can I increase my support circles? What do I need for myself to be able to provide effective assistance? The process of providing emotional assistance in times of distress is rewarding and empowering for the helper, but on the other hand can be demanding, exhausting, and frustrating, and can trigger feelings of emotional overload. Therefore, at the end of an emotional support conversation/meeting, it is important to have a collaborative conversation with another staff member and/or with a manager/instructor to process the emotional content that arose while assistance was being delivered.

Principles for providing emotional first aid

- **The conversation must be based on facts.** The presentation of events should be factual. Avoid dramatic, anxiety-intensifying descriptions.
- **Give space for emotional expression.** It is important to facilitate emotional expression without fear of judgment or criticism. Create a comfortable atmosphere and give legitimacy to a variety of feelings, including pain, shock, despair, guilt, apathy, aggression, anxiety, grief, rage, and more. You can say that we are in a difficult emotional state, and that everyone feels different emotions and expresses feelings in their own way.

Conducting a regulated and calm conversation focusing on various aspects:



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- What do you feel/think regarding the event? What are your strongest feelings right now?
- Source of the emotion (What are you afraid of? What are you angry about? Whom are you blaming?)
- Have you experienced this type of event (or a similar type of event) in the past? How did you feel?
- Today, do you feel the same emotion about this past event? If not, why do you feel differently?
- What is the most difficult part of the event for you?
- What are some things that can really help in moments like these?
- Who or what helps you deal with difficult situations? What might help you deal with the current situation, in light of your life experiences?
- You can say that we don't know all the answers, but it is important to convey the feeling that the participant is able to regain a sense of control and belief in his/her abilities. You can reinforce this concept and say that even when things are difficult, we can cope...

Coping strategies

- Encourage participants not to remain alone with their feelings and to expand their circles of support by turning to significant figures around them.
- Encourage participants to use anxiety-reducing strategies that can help them cope with stressful situations, such as relaxation, guided imagery, positive thinking, etc.
- If participants feel the need to share difficult feelings or thoughts beyond the conversation, they can be invited to seek help again, or as needed, turn to a professional.
- Practical recommendations:
 - Increase support circles and find a meaningful and supportive framework.
 - Mention that acute reactions following a crisis are normal and natural, and will usually dissipate over time.
 - Encourage participants to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and impressions when they feel the need to do so.
 - When tension and feelings of stress do not lessen and subside, seek professional help.

* Dr. Shiri Daniels is a member of the professional committee of JReady, the Executive Director of Counseling ERAN and the author of the book "The Power of Listening - Helping those close to you in times of emotional distress and crisis"

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