

## **DIVERSITY AND DISASTER (modified from PFA Manual)**

Disaster shows no respect for age, infirmity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, religion, race, cultural background, or gender. And at times, in the wake of disaster, some of these groups may be targeted or blamed, and require special attention and even protection. Unfortunately, prejudices and biases appear to be part of the human condition - however, if you fail to recognize your own, you may be jeopardizing the health and safety of others. As providers of PFA, it falls on your shoulders to ensure that you are sensitive to a wide range of people. If you feel uncomfortable dealing with any group or individual, immediately inform a supervisor so that someone else may provide them with care.

You are not expected to be a “walking encyclopedia” of various cultural and religious practices. However, as part of your work, it’s essential that some sensitivity be shown. Asking someone if religious or cultural beliefs are important to her/him is a good first step. If such beliefs or values are important, ask to be educated. We know that sweet grass ceremonies can be very meaningful spiritual rituals for first nations members; rigid interpretation of a “no smoking” policy may not prove helpful. While a touch on the hand or shoulder (i.e., a “safe zone”) may be reassuring to a very distraught person, observant Muslims tend not to touch members of the opposite sex and a seemingly safe touch may be perceived as anything but safe. While many people often accept well-meant gestures even if cultural or religious practices have been transgressed, enquiring about and respecting such practices will go a long way towards your acceptance as a care provider, and your ability to connect with those you are working with.

Attitudes towards death, expression of emotion, contact with authorities and receptivity to counselling can all be influenced by diversity, and the greater your understanding of this, the better you will be able to deliver PFA to the wide range of people whose lives are turned upside down in a disaster.

### **At Risk Populations**

As noted above, disaster shows no respect for diversity, and there is little “fairness” in trauma. Those in economically disadvantaged groups may have had a higher percentage that have survived prior tragic events (death of a loved one, assault, disaster) and may have a higher incidence of pre-existing trauma-related mental health problems. As a result, they are at higher risk of developing significant difficulties in the wake of subsequent tragedy.

Individuals that are at particular risk of developing mental health difficulties following a disaster include:

- Children, especially those separated from caregivers, whose parents or caregivers have died or are missing or injured, or those involved in the foster care system. Because of the fairly unique needs of children, an additional module on dealing with children will follow.

- Adolescents with a predisposition towards risk-taking.
- Adults with multiple responsibilities (parent, emergency responder, PFA provider...)
- The elderly can be particularly sensitive to disruptions in routine, may not be able to access essential medication, or may have greater difficulty comprehending their predicament if there are age-related cognitive difficulties.
- Those who have been injured.
- Those who have had multiple relocations and displacements.
- Medically frail or disabled children and adults (difficulties accessing assistive devices, caregivers, medications, etc.)
- Those with serious mental illness.
- Those with substance abuse problems.
- Pregnant or lactating women.
- Parents with babies and small children.
- Disaster response personnel.
- Those with significant loss of possessions.
- Those exposed first hand to grotesque scenes or extreme threat to life.

You generally find out if an individual belongs to one of these groups by asking. It is essential that you note when you've come in contact with these people, and to consult with supervisors to determine if further follow-up is warranted.