

# **Coping with Prolonged Life Disruption due to Disaster A Protocol for Group Intervention**

By

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Abstract: This article presents a group protocol designed to assist people in coping with a prolonged life disruption due to disaster. The protocol is intended to enable participants to address the psychological issues necessary to cope during periods of extreme stress. A step by step description of the protocol is provided. It has been adapted from the author's previously published article titled "Coping with Threats of Terrorism", International Journal of Emergency Mental Health Volume 5, Number 1, winter 2003.

The following protocol is designed to provide support to groups who are faced with the challenge of stress and anxiety related to disaster.

Van der Kolk (1996) suggests that "the emotional impact of a traumatic event can be substantially modified by preparation and training. The sense of helplessness is lessened as the individual gains an understanding of the behaviors that will aid in survival" (p.175). Following the suggestions of van der Kolk, this protocol will attempt to help participants feel less helpless by understanding those behaviors that may help them in their physical and emotional survival.

Mitchell and Everly (1999) have developed approaches to crisis intervention that stress the importance of helping individuals to be fully cognizant of their thoughts and feelings regarding the traumatic circumstances. In their group crisis intervention approaches they emphasize the importance of starting the process with participants dealing with issues at a cognitive level, gradually approaching the participants' emotional reactions and finally concluding with the participants' returning to a cognitive level. Mitchell and Everly further stress the importance of educating participants regarding their reactions and ways to mitigate the impact of the event.

## **The Protocol**

The format of the group is a guided group discussion. Part of the process is educational, part is sharing of ideas and part is catharsis. The group process follows the general format of working from cognitive to affective to cognitive domains. It is expected that

the process will take from 1 - 2 hours to complete. Following an introduction to explain the process and its purpose, each discussion topic is presented by the leader. Group members then discuss the issues, followed by the leader summarizing each topic. Participants are encouraged to take notes and a pencil and paper are provided to each participant.

## **Introduction**

The leader explains the protocol and its purpose. The purpose is described as follows: "The goal of this meeting to help people share each others frustrations, fears and coping strategies so that we can learn new ways of coping with the disaster situation.

Unfortunately, we may or may not be able to change your immediate circumstances, but we have found that people can better cope if they understand their reactions and receive information on how to cope with those reactions."

It is important to address what participants can expect from participation in the group. An example of this would be: "*We will try to help the group to understand what they can do to support themselves, their families and each other.*" The final part of the introduction is to provide some general information on how people cope with extreme stress. This information can be a brief overview of the different discussion topics, enabling the participants to start thinking in terms of coping strategies. In all instances, the introduction and the specific discussion topics should be specifically tailored to the particular audience as well as the nature of the specific disaster.

## **Discussion topics**

### **I. Attempts to gain control of the situation**

This topic asks the participants to understand how they and others try to gain control of a situation to eliminate distress. Some attempts to eliminate distress can be helpful, while others may be dysfunctional and can even lead to increased stress. The discussion is started by explaining that people will attempt to gain control of disruptive situations to relieve a sense of helplessness. Give examples such as how one may try to go to areas that are unsafe or do things that are unsafe because doing nothing is intolerable. The group should be asked to: 1) discuss what aspects of the current circumstances one can realistically expect to control. 2) Identify what steps participants think they can take to realistically increase their ability to cope. 3) Look together at how plausible these steps might be. Allow for significant variability in each members need for control.

### **II. Use of psychological coping strategies**

This topic addresses how group participants are utilizing psychological defense mechanisms as coping strategies to deal with the disaster. The leader should explain the following: 1. How psychological defense mechanisms help us to cope with our emotions. 2. How our normal defense mechanisms are created over a lifetime and how new circumstances may overwhelm traditional defense mechanisms. 3. That major life disruptions may lead to the need to build new defense mechanisms and to adjust existing

ones.

The leader should give examples of defense mechanisms such as sublimation, denial and rationalization, and explain what each does. Use examples you've seen people using during this disaster.

The group is then asked to discuss how members are successfully utilizing defense mechanisms. Group members should write down defense mechanisms they feel they need to utilize or modify.

### **III. Resorting to unhealthy habits when under extreme stress**

The leader starts this discussion by acknowledging that reverting to old habits or increasing existing unhealthy habits like smoking, the use of drugs or alcohol, unhealthy eating habits or lack of exercise add to the overall level of stress. Discussion will focus on what each individual is doing that adds to his or her stress and what he or she can do about it. Following the discussion, the leader should teach on the unhealthy reactions expressed by group members and what can be done to improve them.

### **IV. Turning to spiritual beliefs in times of distress**

The leader starts this discussion by pointing out that many people turn to spiritual beliefs during times of distress. It should be acknowledged from the start that not all people have spiritual beliefs and that there is great diversity in what people believe. The purpose of this discussion is strictly to raise awareness on how different people utilize their spirituality, and not to suggest that people believe in any particular way. The leader should ask participants to discuss (without imposing their beliefs on others) how their spiritual beliefs help them get through difficult times. The leader should reinforce each person's right to have their own beliefs, or to not have spiritual beliefs.

### **V. Coping with the frustrations of drastically different living circumstances.**

In major disaster situations great inconvenience and frustration may emerge due to vast and sudden changes in life circumstances. Living in shelters creates many inconveniences and requires that people cope with living circumstances that are provided by government and disaster relief agencies. People may find that one of the primary emotional reactions is the loss of comfort that comes with having a sense of their own place. Even in our ordinary working lives, we create spaces (cubicles!) that are uniquely our own. Not having a place that is one's own often enhances feelings of helplessness. In a disaster situation, it is often helpful if people can make a portable place of sorts, by carrying any special clothing, photographs, or objects they may have, or even making their cot up the same way every day. The leader should explain that for many people working with the relief organization efforts to provide shelter, safety and security is also a way of coping with the resulting inconvenience and lifestyle changes. This fosters a sense of control to offset the helplessness that is inherent in any disaster situation.

Participants are asked to discuss how some of these inconveniences may make them feel, and to identify ways they may be able to gain a sense of control and a place for themselves.

## **VI. Ventilating emotions about grief, fear and frustration in safe and constructive ways**

The leader starts by explaining that ventilating feelings in appropriate ways is much more helpful than containing these feelings. Participants are asked to share the emotions that are most “bottled up” in them. The leader should explain to the group that ventilating feelings does not necessarily change things, but can give us insight into what we need to do to develop new coping strategies

## **VII. Summarization**

Summarize what group members have shared about their insights into what they can do to cope more effectively.

## **VIII. Teaching**

The leader should teach additional coping strategies based on what participants have presented. The emphasis should be on positive coping strategies that people have shared as well as ideas from the group leader.

It is important to emphasize that fear and anxiety are normal emotions at times like this. By understanding how to deal with these emotions, people may be better equipped to persevere through the circumstances of a major disaster. In the event of prolonged and persistent life disruption there will be large numbers of individuals who will need support. This protocol is intended to be both an educational and interactive experience.

Follow up sessions may also need to be held to further develop the skills that have been acquired in the first group meeting and to address new issues as they emerge.

This protocol has been utilized following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, the anthrax attacks on the U.S. Postal system and the sniper attacks in the Maryland and Virginia suburbs of the United States in the fall of 2002. Research studies are needed to test the efficacy of this approach. The author suggests that additional techniques as well as follow-up approaches are needed to provide a comprehensive program of support for populations subject to immediate threats of terrorism.

## **Protocol Outline**

This protocol outline is provided as a quick reference for support personnel utilizing this protocol in the field.

Introduction: Leader explains the protocol and its purpose

#### Discussion Topics

- I. Attempts to gain control of the situation: Group focuses on possible actions to take, and how realistic these ideas are.
- II. Use of psychological coping strategies: Group discusses how participants are utilizing psychological defense mechanisms to deal with the disaster
- III. Resorting to unhealthy habits when under extreme stress: Discussion focuses on what each individual is doing that increases and/or reduces his or her stress.
- IV. Turning to spiritual beliefs in times of distress: Participants discuss (without imposing their beliefs on others) how their spiritual beliefs help them get through difficult times.
- V. Coping with the frustrations of major life disruption: Participants discuss how some of these inconveniences may make them feel, and perhaps, be safer.
- VI. Ventilating emotions about fears in safe and constructive ways: Participants share emotions that are most “bottled up” in them.
- VII. Summarization: Summarize insights group members have shared regarding what they can do to cope more effectively.
- VIII. Teaching: Teach additional coping strategies based on what participants have presented.

#### References

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