

Guidelines for Working with People with Functional Needs

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Basic psychological first aid

- Make a statement of **empathy** within the *first 30 seconds*. For example:
 - “I know this is difficult for you”
 - “Looks like you’re having a tough time”
- **Introduce** yourself
If you have a title within an organization, people will expect you to be competent until you prove otherwise
- Be **respectful** from the start
 - Use “please” and “thank you”, “sir” or “ma’am”
 - Address people by Mr., Mrs., or Ms. and their last name
 - Use last names until given permission to use first names
- People do best when they can take some sort of **action** themselves
 - People in crisis want to be participants, not spectators
 - Give the person some task to accomplish
 - Allow people to make their own decisions, even if they ask your opinion
 - Remember that a decision that would work well for you, may not work for someone else

People who are hard of hearing or deaf

- Not all people who are hard of hearing or deaf use sign language
 - They may use spoken language, visual communication or sign language
- Get the person’s attention by tapping their shoulder or waving your hand
- Speak clearly at a normal rate of speed and volume
- Make sure your mouth is clearly visible
 - Only 30-35% of language is visible by lip-reading, yelling distorts the face, making lip-reading more difficult
- Use gestures if at all possible, make sure your non-verbal communication matches the message you are sending
- Offer pen and paper. Write notes to make sure the communication is clear
- If you will be with the person for a length of time (i.e., in a shelter or family assistance center), ask if the person would like a qualified sign language interpreter

People who are deaf-blind

- Mark an “X” on the person’s back or shoulder (universal communication) to indicate there is an emergency and that he/she should trust you and follow you

- Use printing on the person's palm (capital block letters), making sure your finger remains in constant contact with the hand until you complete the letter
- Provide assistance when moving in an unfamiliar location

People who are blind

- Blind and visually impaired persons have widely varying levels of independence skills. Some will need no more help than a sighted person, while some with less skills will need more help
- A minority of the blind use guide dogs and many do use white canes
- Do identify yourself verbally
- Do ask if they need help
- Do explain what you are doing
- Ask if they have any questions

People with service animals

- Only touch the service animal if the owner gives permission

Seniors

- Make sure they bring any assistive devices, such as walkers, canes, hearing aides (and batteries) and eyeglasses
- If the person has a vision loss, offer your arm for them to hold as you guide them to safety
- If possible, assist the person in gathering all medications, inhalers and nebulizers before evacuating. Remember that some medications, such as insulin, may be kept in the refrigerator
- Ask how to reach family/friends before evacuating, as the person may have family phone numbers programmed onto speed dial on a phone and may not remember phone numbers once outside the home

People with mobility impairments

Always ask the person how you can help before attempting any assistance. Every person and every disability is unique – even though it may be important to evacuate the location, respect the person's independence as much as extent possible. Don't make assumptions about the person's abilities.

- Ask if they have limitations or problems that may affect their safety.
- Some people may need assistance getting out of bed or out of a chair, but CAN then proceed without assistance.
- Here are some other questions you may find helpful:
 "Are you able to stand or walk without the help of a mobility device like a cane, walker or a wheelchair?"
 "You might have to [stand] [walk] for quite awhile on your own. Will this be ok? Please be sure and tell someone if you think you need assistance."
 "Do you have full use of your arms?"

Wheelchair Users

- If the conversation will take more than a few minutes, sit down to speak at eye level.
- Ask before you assume you need to help, or what that help should be.

Children

- Children may need you to repeat directions, or answers to their questions, several times
- Validate the child's thoughts and feelings
- Reassure, but only promise what you can actually do (say "I'm here to help you", not "everything is going to be alright")
- Use digital or Polaroid photos to document children separated from parents
- Index the photos and provide a system for presenting select photos to parents (i.e., similar age/gender/ethnicity)
- Provide a site where arriving parents can review photos with privacy

People with mental illness

- If at all possible, arrange for the person to call their regular service provider or caseworker to provide for continuity of care
- Ask them to bring their medications with them if at all possible

People who are agitated

- Remember to start with a statement of empathy
- Try to find a point of agreement
- Act calm, even if you're not (keep your voice calm, maintain soft eye contact)
- Approach from the side when possible
- Speak in a calm, neutral tone of voice
- Intervene only during the lulls if the person is talking or shouting
- Maintain an L-shaped stance
- If threatened, get out and get help

References:

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