Coping with Technological Disasters Appendix F:

Peer Listener Training Manual

Prepared by: Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council
Original 1999, updated 2004, 2021, 2023

This appendix is a resource for those looking to provide peer support in the event of a disaster. Updated in 2023, the latest revisions reflect the current understanding of peer-to-peer support and active listening. The manual begins by explaining the value of peer listening, followed by sections on understanding disasters, building peer listening skills, recognizing common challenges, and seeking and providing support. A limited list of additional national and Alaska-based resources is provided in conclusion.

August 21, 2023, note: This document is draft and is expected to be approved by the Council September 21, 2023.

Contents

Background

Following the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska, and the BP Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico, communities underwent a prolonged recovery. Peer Listener Training Programs were designed to train local residents to provide peer support within these disaster-impacted communities.

The original Peer Listener Training Manual (created 1999, updated 2004) was developed by the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council (PWSRCAC) in consultation with Dr. Steve Picou, a leading researcher in the field of disasters and mental health who studied both the Exxon Valdez and Deepwater Horizon oil spills. His many years of work studying the mental health and social effects of the Exxon Valdez oil spill were used as the basis for the development of that program manual.

The manual included an appendix with a Peer Listener Training session outline and materials for distribution during a formal peer listener training. Those materials are now outdated, given how far the fields of peer-to-peer support and community resilience have evolved since the mid-1990s when the training was originally created.

The original manual was used by the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium, which then updated and customized the content to help residents deal with BP's 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster and again in 2020 for the COVID-19 pandemic. Find out more about their program and manual at: www.masgc.org/peer-listening/training

This edition builds on the original manual and the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium version, and was revised to reflect the current understanding of peer-to-peer support and listening.

How to Use this Manual

This manual is intended as a guide for those who want to help after their community has been through a disaster. The manual's goal is to teach you to be a better active listener so you can help your friends, family, and neighbors heal emotionally. We also encourage you to explore additional resources available online, some of which we link to within this manual.

Remember that integral to being a peer is having gone through the same experience. This means that you are healing yourself as much as you are helping others heal. Peer listening is volunteer work. Only you will know how much time and energy you can give while still taking care of yourself. It is important that you have enough time to listen without feeling rushed. It is equally important that you are prepared to seek help when the problems you encounter are overwhelming.

What are Peer Listeners?

Peer listeners are members of the community who have been through the same disaster and learn how to actively listen so they can informally support others who want to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences without judgement. **Peer listeners are not therapists or social workers.** Instead of offering professional services, peer listeners help by being good listeners. In so doing,

peer listeners serve to rebuild trust, a sense of safety, and a sense of self-reliance or self-control for their friends and neighbors.

Talking with someone who truly knows a community—like a peer listener—can be beneficial in helping people feel understood and cared for. Through their shared experience, special training in listening skills, and preexisting connection to the community, peer listeners have a unique opportunity to assist friends and neighbors with ongoing concerns. A peer listener serves as an available ear and may encourage their peers to seek more formal sources of support.

While traditional mental health services are important, peer listening can step in where their reach and impact fall short. Research on rural communities and disaster effects has shown that many people affected by disasters are reluctant to use traditional mental health services. That is particularly true when the disaster is human-caused, such as technological disasters, which have lasting impacts on the emotional and social well-being of communities. On top of that, traditional mental health services may be overwhelmed when the aftereffects of disaster are widespread. Furthermore, those professional services may not be effective at dealing with the long-term effects of disaster. This is where peer listening can benefit a community. The widespread use and modeling of good, active listening has lasting impact: it remains in the community as an ongoing resource and builds resiliency against future disasters.

Section 1: Understanding Disasters

How a disaster affects a community varies by the type of disaster. Several factors can make healing from a disaster more complicated, including who or what is blamed for the disaster, and perceptions of who is responsible for recovery efforts. The influence of social media can be an especially complicating factor.

Types of Disasters

Natural disasters like an earthquake or a typhoon have always been part of human experience. They are tragic, but in most cases systems and traditions are in place for the survivors to receive support and bond together. There are also human-caused disasters, such as oil spills and airplane crashes, after which questions of responsibility can create victim-blaming or suppress relief efforts. As we saw with the imperfect disaster preparation and response efforts following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and with the COVID-19 pandemic, most disasters have impacts that are a combination of natural and human-caused.

These distinctions matter because they affect how survivors are supported and how survivors heal. If you survive an earthquake, for example, you know when it is over. Through your recovery, you also learn to trust your ability to heal and rebuild. If you survive a chemical spill, however, a more complex cleanup and lawsuits could draw out the recovery process; long-term effects could take years to surface.

Table 1: Characteristics of Different Classes of Disasters

Technological or "Human-caused" Disasters	**Natural Disasters**
Non-toxic examples: terrorism, airplane crash, dam collapse, train derailing, riot, power outages *Toxic examples*: oil spill, chemical spill, radiation leak	*Non-toxic examples*: earthquake, wildfire, typhoon, hurricane, tornado, flood, drought *Toxic examples*: radon gas contamination
No warning	May involve some warning time
Suffering often not acknowledged, increased likelihood of victim-blaming, particularly through social media	Usually, positive community response in the aftermath with community bonding through efforts to rebuild
Long-term effects more common	Primarily short-term psychological effects

Question to Consider:
Why are human-caused disasters harder to recover from?

Media and Social Media

News media and social media often present either complicated or oversimplified versions of disaster stories that effectively deny victims' suffering or accuse them of trying to make money off the tragedy. Media-generated stories can divide a community and make it harder for neighbors to trust one another. Remote strangers may have lots of opinions, but as their opinions are not informed by post-disaster realities on the ground, they often negatively affect recovery work like rebuilding, and how individuals in disaster-hit communities heal mentally and emotionally.

Following a disaster, peer listeners help by listening, not judging. Your community can rebuild socially when everyone feels safe sharing the complicated realities with each other, regardless of all the outside opinions.

Phases of Recovery

Post-disaster healing follows a common pattern. Immediately effective actions, like rescues and emergency supplies, create an early sense of relief (the **Heroic** phase). Also, shared goodwill leads to community bonding (the **Honeymoon** phase). Eventually the realities of the longer-term effects and the limitations of external supports settle in, and the **Disillusionment** phase begins. At this time, anger and blame are common, and serious emotional problems are likely to arise. A significant emotional dip also commonly occurs around the one-year anniversary of the event. Finally, the process of rebuilding starts to have its own emotional impacts. In this **Reconstruction** phase, communities can work through grief and make real progress. There are always setbacks, but with sufficient support, most communities will recover.

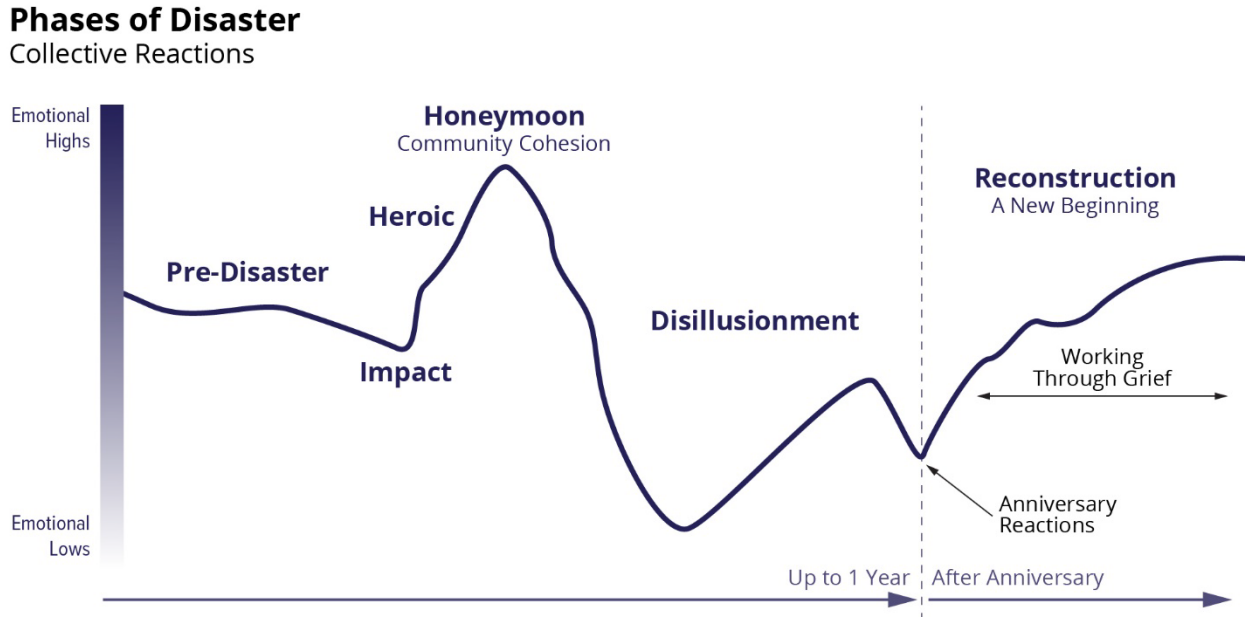

Figure 1: Phases of Disaster[i]

Formal and Informal Sources of Support

The exceptional needs that follow a disaster can often be addressed through both pre-existing and temporary formal sources of support.

Types of Formal Support

- Relief such as temporary shelter, food, and financial support.
- Rebuilding efforts such as construction, utilities repair, and economic investment.
- Medical personnel such as doctors and nurses who diagnose and treat physical health needs.
- Clinical social workers and therapists who diagnose and treat mental health needs.
- Direct service social workers and case managers who coordinate services to meet social, economic, physical, and emotional needs.
- Community health workers who promote prevention and screen to see if individuals qualify for other services.
- Behavioral health aides and peer support specialists who provide personal and cultural insights related to the treatment and services provided by medical personnel, social workers, therapists, and case managers.

Need for Informal Sources of Support

For various reasons, disaster survivors do not always seek formal support services when they are available. Additionally, in rural communities, formal support services are often very limited, may not be as accessible, and may be overburdened. Finally, mental and emotional healing requires community support—outsiders can only help with the basics. In combination, these factors explain the need for more informal sources of support, including peer listening.

Section 2: Building Peer Listening Skills

The term "**peer listening**" emphasizes the importance of **listening** over counseling or giving advice.

Peer Listening

Peer listening is an active form of listening: listeners use empathy and caring to reflect the thoughts and feelings of the speaker back to them. In the process, the speaker hears themselves more clearly and in so doing discovers both their strengths and their needs. When you listen effectively as a peer listener, you allow the speaker to develop their own solution for their problem.

Communicating our feelings to others is important to the process of coping with and healing from any crisis situation. As you learn to listen actively and help your peers through this process, you will create important links in your community. These links build a stronger community that supports the healing process.

What Peer Listeners Do:

- Act as key components to recovery by being people to talk to.
- Actively train in communication skills.
- Provide information about community resources.
- Assure confidentiality and trust.
- Model healthy relationships.
- Respect emotions and seek to understand them rather than shut them down.
- Encourage self-advocacy and decision-making.
- Recognize the additional stress and unique needs of disaster survivors.
- Normalize seeking help.

Communication Tips

1. **Stop talking.** You can't listen while you are talking.
2. **Get rid of distractions.** Avoid fiddling with things, such as your cell phone. Get away from unnecessary noise such as TV or radio. Make your surroundings as free of distractions as possible.
3. **Be interested and show it.** Genuine concern and a lively curiosity encourage others to speak freely. Interest also sharpens your attention and builds on itself.
4. **Tune in to the other person.** Try to understand their viewpoint, assumptions, and needs, and how all three fit into their beliefs.
5. **Concentrate on the message.** Focus your attention on the speaker's ideas and feelings related to the crisis. Listen to *how* they say what they say. The speaker's attitudes and emotional reactions may convey as much—or more—meaning than the words they use. Often people talk to "get something off their chests." Feelings, not facts, may be the main message. Try to keep your prior knowledge or biases about the speaker from influencing your interpretation of what they are trying to say in this instance.
6. **Look for the main ideas.** Avoid being distracted by details. Focus on the key issue.

7. **Paraphrase and ask for confirmation about what you think the speaker means and wants.** Remember that you will be interpreting the speaker's feelings and statements based on your experience, values, viewpoint, and prejudices. You cannot listen as a blank slate, so be honest with yourself about how it affects what you hear.
8. **Look at the other person.** Let them know that you are listening. Maintain eye contact if culturally appropriate, but avoid staring. Smile, nod, or otherwise quietly let them know you are with them.
9. **Notice nonverbal language.** The face, eyes, and hands all help to convey messages. Shrugs, smiles, nervous laughs, gestures, facial expressions, and body positions speak volumes. Start to read them. Be sure to test your interpretations of these nonverbal messages just as you do the verbal ones.
10. **Avoid hasty judgment.** Don't jump to conclusions regarding the situation or what the person wants. Hear the speaker out. Plan your response only after you have confirmed that you understand what the speaker is meaning to say. Prejudgments can close us off to new messages.
11. **Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.** Empathy is not about asking what you would do in another person's situation. Empathy means asking what situation would cause you to act, think, or speak the same way they are.[ii] When uncertain, always choose the most charitable interpretation.
12. **Get feedback.** Make certain you are really listening. Ask a question. Confirm with the speaker what they actually said.
13. **Leave your personal emotions aside.** Try to keep your unrelated worries, fears, or problems out of the situation. They will prevent you from empathizing and truly listening.
14. **Share responsibility for communication.** You, the listener, have an important role. When you don't understand, ask for clarification. Don't give up too soon or interrupt needlessly. Give the speaker time to express what they have to say.
15. **Work at listening.** Hearing is passive; our nervous system does the work. Listening is active; it takes mental effort and attention. When you reflect back to the speaker with your reply, repeat some of what they told you using their language. This attention to detail demonstrates that you care.

Nonverbal Communication

Like with language, nonverbal communication can vary significantly based on the stress the speaker is under, cultural and individual factors, and the preexisting relationship between the speaker and the listener. It is also important for you as a peer listener to consider what your nonverbal communications are saying. As with verbal communication, peer listeners should listen and adjust. Mirror the speaker's nonverbal communications that express respect and invite focus and openness.

Quick Tips for Nonverbal Communication[iii]

1. **Maintain an open body position.** Avoid crossing your arms over your body—it may appear defensive. When your body position is open, it conveys that you are open to listening.

2. **Sit alongside and angled toward the person rather than directly opposite them.** This allows the conversation to feel friendly and nonconfrontational. No one wants to feel like they're being interviewed. Do not stand over them. Try to stay at the same level.

Appropriate Touch[iv]

Touch is an important part of human communication and emotional connection. However, touch can often be misunderstood and has different meanings depending on cultural and individual background. As a peer listener, you will support people when they are vulnerable. One person may find a hug deeply relaxing. Another person may find the same hug confusing or unwelcome.

Approach touch with the following considerations.

- Do not be the first to touch.
- Do not assume that touch is welcome unless the speaker has expressed their comfort.
- Even if you are sure touch is welcome:
    - Ask for consent.
        - "Would it be okay for me to hold your hand right now?"
        - "Do you want a hug?"
    - Limit touching to safe areas like hands, shoulders, and upper back.
    - Do not touch in a way that might be mistaken as romantic or sexual, such as a shoulder rub or touching someone's leg.
    - Be clear that your touching is an offer of comfort and support.

Cultural Humility[v]

We can support each other in "how" to do things, but culture is often where each of us finds our "why." Each culture's values, customs, traditions, and natural support networks help survivors build resiliency and find meaning.[vi]

Cultural differences aren't always visible or obvious. Most cultural differences also have long histories. Some cultural differences are associated with trauma, shame, or historical trauma. Every community consists of people from lots of different cultural backgrounds. We shouldn't expect ourselves to know about the specific cultural experiences of every individual in our community. We can, however, approach cultural differences with a deep sense of humility. This requires us to recognize when we don't understand someone else's culture, and also to recognize that our own cultural assumptions affect our every experience.

Cultural humility is particularly important if you are part of the dominant culture and have been taught to see your culture as more "normal" or important than other cultures. Historically, colonialism has served to erase or shame Alaska Native and American Indian culture, and to replace the cultures of other colonized groups. Acknowledging this history and being mindful of it as a peer listener is a key component of cultural humility. See later section on historical trauma.

Questions to Consider:
What are some ways that your culture helps you heal?
What are some aspects of your culture that someone might find strange?
What biases might you have due to your own cultural background, and how could keeping them in mind make you a better peer listener?

Red Flag Responses

As a peer listener, be aware that some commonly used phrases are far less helpful in crisis situations than they appear on the surface.

Table 2 Responses and Phrases to Avoid

Don't Use	**Why?**
"I know what you mean."	Each person's experience is unique, and while it's a peer listener's role to empathize, it's important to let the speaker have their own experience. Sometimes talking about yourself can introduce an element of competition into the conversation and cause the speaker to feel they must fight to have their own experience recognized.
"It's God's Plan" or "Everything will be alright."[vii]	Pain and fear are real feelings. These phrases minimize those feelings and can cause the speaker to feel shame for sharing them.
"You should . . ."	As a peer listener, your focus is to listen and empower, not direct or rescue.
"Calm down."	Even if calming down would help, telling someone in crisis to calm down rarely has the intended effect. Furthermore, a peer listener should offer a safe place for a speaker to explore their feelings, which may be overwhelming alone but can be worked through with the support of an effective listener.
"What were you thinking?" or "Why would you do that?"	Even if spoken in a warm and inviting tone, these phrases might sound like judgment. And if spoken in a judgmental tone, they shut down communication altogether. People who have been through extreme stress may not be proud of decisions, behaviors, needs, or feelings that are rooted in that stress.

Common Response Styles

We use many different response styles in everyday conversation. But as a peer listener, you play a specific role of support for another person—conversations are not as two-sided as typical social interactions tend to be.

Supporting and Reassuring Responses

As a peer listener, be intentional about your responses by using supporting and reassuring responses, which indicate your support and concern for the speaker's feelings.

General rule: Allow for emotional release, but be careful not to commit yourself or the speaker to any specific position or course of action that comes up during an emotional moment.

Do	**Don't**
• Demonstrate your concern and support • Prompt speaker to continue or elaborate • Validate a speaker's emotions • Remain attentive • Limit the number of questions you ask • Allow for attentive silence	• Give false reassurances • Offer opinions • Feed into negative thinking or decisions • Agree so readily or repetitively that you sound critical or sarcastic • Interrupt • Make it about you

Questions to Consider:
What are some phrases you might use to express support?
What are phrases you've heard (or used) in attempts to be supportive that are not helpful?

Understanding and Paraphrasing Responses

The responses below demonstrate a peer listener's desire to understand a speaker's thoughts and feelings. Paraphrase what the speaker has said in your own words.

General rule: A peer listener can use understanding and paraphrasing responses frequently, as they demonstrate engagement and offer the speaker a chance to clarify or reconsider.

Do	**Don't**
• Paraphrase to seek clarification • Reflect the speaker's ideas in a way that allows for revision • Ask open-ended questions • Demonstrate that you are trying to understand	• Agree or disagree • Ask the speaker to commit to a position • Ask questions that can be answered with only "yes" or "no" • Use loaded questions that imply judgment • Question the speaker's reasoning or motivations

Questions to Consider:
What are some phrases you might use to express understanding?
What are phrases you've heard (or used) in attempts to understand or paraphrase that are not helpful?

Recognizing and Interpreting Responses

Recognizing and interpreting responses offer insights into feelings and behaviors. A listener can use them to point out potentially hidden connections between a speaker's thoughts and feelings, or between different subjects. When listening, you can use this response style to encourage the speaker to explore their thoughts and feelings.

General rule: Focus on expressing recognition of emotions and behaviors, and encourage the speaker to find their own interpretations. Avoid recognizing and interpreting responses altogether in the early stages of peer listening; instead, spend more time listening.

Do	**Don't**
• Acknowledge the impact of the disaster • Recognize the importance and impact of feelings • Acknowledge that feelings aren't rational • Honor the needs that motivate the feelings • Distinguish between feelings and behavior • Allow the speaker time for self-reflection • Cite specific observations, such as which topics seem to elicit specific emotions/behaviors, or which topics the speaker keeps circling back to	• Imply that you expect the speaker to be recovered • Try to control or redirect the speaker's feelings • Make the speaker defend their feelings • Feed into the feelings • Endorse feelings as objective truth • Jump in to help the speaker interpret • Provide interpretations or attempt to analyze the speaker's behavior

Questions to Consider:
What are some phrases you might use to express recognition?
What are phrases you've heard (or used) in attempts to recognize or interpret that are not helpful?

Probing and Questioning Responses

Probing and questioning responses reflect a listener's desire for more information to better understand the problem. Peer listeners can use this response style to encourage the speaker to think through their ideas, allowing for problem-solving.

General rule: Use probing and questioning responses to help the speaker explore, but be careful not to advise.

Do	**Don't**
• Empower the speaker to problem-solve • Encourage thinking out loud • Allow the speaker to explore multiple options • Discuss available resources	• Do the speaker's thinking for them • Eliminate options • Focus on a decision • Make generalizations about what is possible or easy • Assume there is a correct answer

Questions to Consider:
What are some phrases you might use to express probing?
What are phrases you've heard (or used) in attempts to probe or question that are not helpful?

Evaluating and Advising Responses

Evaluating and advising responses involve judgments on the speaker's problem, or contain advice and imply what the speaker ought to do.

General rule: While you may use these responses in your everyday relationships, they don't serve the purposes of peer listening. Avoid evaluating and advising responses altogether in the early stages of peer listening, and use only with extreme caution later on.

Do	**Don't**
• Remember that your role as a peer listener is different from your role as a friend or neighbor • You may need to use this response style if you are concerned for someone's safety. See Section 4: Helping Someone to Seek Help on directing people to additional resources.	• Position yourself as an expert or advisor • Push someone to seek formal support if they are not coming to that conclusion for themselves, *unless* you are concerned for someone's safety

Section 3: Recognizing Common Challenges

Sometimes people encounter situations where they are overwhelmed and unable to find or carry out their own solutions. They may benefit from a trained professional's help in moving forward. **See Section 4 for more information.**

Peer listeners are not expected or qualified to diagnose mental disorders. You will, however, notice certain patterns in the struggles of your community. This section outlines what those common challenges might be and how you can support a friend or community member who is experiencing them.

Alcohol and Substance Misuse

Some people increase their use of alcohol, prescription medications, or other drugs after a disaster. Using drugs and alcohol may provide temporary escape from bad feelings or physical problems caused by increased stress. However, substance misuse can make such problems worse in the long term. When misused, substances can interrupt natural sleep cycles, create health problems, interfere with relationships, and create substance dependence.

How Peer Listeners Can Support Someone Who is Increasing their Substance Use

- Remain calm, unemotional, and factually honest when discussing substance use and related topics, like consequences of use.
- Remember to validate the user's emotional needs as normal, but don't endorse destructive behaviors.
- Provide sober social opportunities.
- Encourage cultural activities and hobbies that can provide healthy and enjoyable distraction in place of substance use.
- Help develop alternate plans to aid with anxiety, depression, muscle tension, or sleep difficulties.
- Be patient and supportive. Recovery is a journey that will have multiple ups and downs.

Suicide

*Suicide is most often preventable. For every person who dies by suicide annually, there are **316** people who seriously consider suicide but do not kill themselves.*[viii]

While serving as a peer listener, it is possible you or someone you listen to will experience suicidal thoughts or intent. It is difficult and scary to have or hear suicidal thoughts, so it is important to be prepared with a plan for how to act if or when the need arises.

A Peer Listener Should:

- Call 988 with the person expressing suicidal thoughts, or have them call in your presence.
- Not leave the person expressing suicidal thoughts alone.
- Stay with the person expressing suicidal thoughts until someone else is available, or take the person to a mental health professional.

Warning Signs[ix]

These are common warning signs that someone is at immediate risk of suicide. If you witness any of the following three warning signs in yourself or others, **immediately call the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988, or a mental health professional:**

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself.
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun.
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.

Other behaviors such as the following may also indicate a serious risk—especially if the behavior is new, has increased, and/or seems related to a painful event, loss, or change.

- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain.
- Talking about being a burden to others.
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs.
- Acting anxious or agitated, and/or behaving recklessly.
- Sleeping too little or too much.
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated.
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge.
- Displaying extreme mood swings.

If you or someone you know is showing these signs, **call the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988**.

Table 3: Helping Someone Who May Be Suicidal[x]

Do	**Don't**
• Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide. • Be willing to listen. Allow expressions of feelings. Accept the feelings. • Be non-judgmental. • Get involved. Become available. Show interest and support. • Offer hope that alternatives are available. • Take action. Remove means, like weapons or pills. • Get help from people or agencies specializing in crisis intervention and suicide prevention.	• Don't act shocked. This will put distance between you. • Don't be sworn to secrecy. Seek support. • Don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or whether feelings are good or bad. Don't lecture on the value of life. • Don't offer insincere reassurance. • Don't brush it off, joke, or otherwise indicate that you don't take the risk seriously.

Suicide Prevention

There are many groups in Alaska working to prevent suicide. See Additional Resources for links to online resources.

Disasters, Trauma, and Grief

Disasters often involve both trauma and grief. Trauma is any experience that overwhelms a person's normal ability to cope. People who have experienced trauma often are unable to relax and struggle to return their focus to their usual routines.

How Peer Listeners Can Support Someone Overwhelmed by Trauma

- **Listen**
- **Provide social support**
  - Face to face support is crucial to helping them rebuild their sense of safety.
- **Anticipate triggers**
  - Triggers are unique to each individual, but you can pay close attention when potential reminders of the traumatic event arise.
  - Encourage them to develop a plan of what to do if they feel overwhelmed.
- **Avoid:**
  - Trying to put a positive spin on someone's experience. They are not "lucky," no matter how much worse it could have been.
  - Making someone feel weak for not being able to "get over it."

Grief

Grief is the process of adjusting to significant changes or disruptions in our lives, including disasters. Shock, anger, and struggling to find meaning are normal phases of grief. Like any healing process, grief is not straightforward. A person can move back and forth between phases.

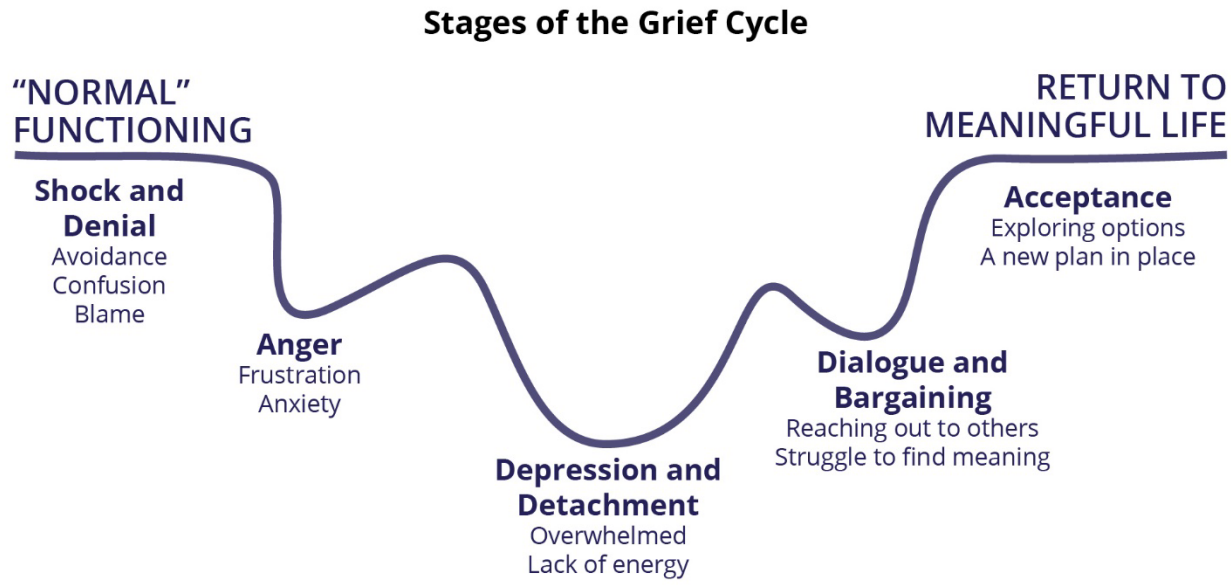

Figure 2: Stages of Grief[xi]

Anger

Anger is one of the most common emotional reactions following a disaster and may be universally experienced by those affected. Anger can be a productive part of the larger grief process because it

energizes us, gives us a sense of control, and makes us aware of our needs. Anger can, however, also distort our thinking and make problem-solving harder. Accepting anger as a natural reaction to disaster and a "normal" stage of grief can help us work through it and separate the helpful from the harmful.

How Peer Listeners Can Support Someone Experiencing Anger

- **Emotional release is an important step in processing anger.**
  - Use supporting and reassuring responses to facilitate a release of emotions.
  - Do not attempt to control or dismiss the anger.
- **Allow the speaker to recognize distorted thinking.**
  - Use understanding and paraphrasing responses to reflect back what you hear.
- **Learn what the anger is teaching.**
  - Use recognizing responses to help the speaker find the needs behind the anger.
  - Do not impose your own interpretations.
  - Do not imply guilt or blame.

Sadness

Everyone occasionally feels sad, usually as a fleeting emotion. If you are supporting someone who experiences sadness you worry they aren't able to manage, offer information on how to contact a professional.

How Peer Listeners Can Support Someone Experiencing Sadness[xii]

- **Be proactive.** They may not feel worthy of your time and energy. Offer to talk with them.
- **Don't claim to understand.** You may understand your own experience of sadness, but give them space to have a unique experience.
- **Accept that sadness is part of their life.** Let them know you accept and support them on down days, too.
- **Lend a hand.** Offering to help with everyday tasks can remind them that there is no shame in asking for help.
- **Give the gift of your time.** It's normal for people to isolate themselves when they are sad. Just showing up and spending time can remind them they don't have to be alone.
- **Build a network of support.** Encourage them to reach out to friends, family, faith communities, and support groups to ensure you're not their primary source of support.
- **Let a professional know if you are concerned about their safety.** See previous section on 'Suicide' for guidance on how to support someone who is experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Ambiguous Loss and Unresolved Grief[xiii]

In its simplest sense, "ambiguous loss" refers to loss without closure. In the wake of disaster, ambiguous loss can occur due to missing loved ones, disrupted relationships and community, or a lingering sense of loss of our previous life.

How Peer Listeners Can Support Someone Experiencing Ambiguous Loss

- Never push for false closure.
- Try to create a sense of stability in relationships.

- Try to facilitate their sense of control in their own lives.
- Encourage optimism while acknowledging negative aspects.
- Suggest that helping others might help develop personal, family, and community pride.

A Note on Vulnerable Populations

Certain people within any community are more at risk for emotional distress after a disaster, and those with more risk are likely to be impacted in different ways over time.

Commonly Vulnerable Populations

- Under-resourced individuals and communities, such as rural communities
- Low-income, impoverished, or poverty-stricken individuals
- People with disabilities
- People who have already experienced disaster or other trauma
- Cultural minorities
- Women and girls
- Elders
- Children

Historical Trauma

Many groups have experienced trauma that spans generations—trauma that affects not just the generation that experiences it, but later generations as well. Historical trauma can have a range of mental and physical health impacts, and individuals within a historically traumatized group can have very different responses, with some being minimally affected and others suffering serious health consequences. This is an example of why it is important to practice cultural humility while listening. You cannot see historical trauma just by looking at someone.

Historical trauma can also disrupt culture and community, which are important sources of healing. Native American, Alaska Native, Filipino, Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities all share the trauma of having had traditional ways of life disrupted and then having been forced to adapt to the ways of the people who colonized their lands. Each of these communities lost different traditions and adapted in different ways. When listening to someone from a cultural background other than your own, practice cultural humility. Keep in mind that you may not know the traumas that have impacted their community.

Violence and Vulnerable Populations

Disasters can place a lot of stress on individuals, families, and communities. Stress can increase the risk for violence in the home, neighborhood, or community.

If someone is experiencing violence, they need more than a peer listener. See Additional Resources at the end of this manual for national and local resources.

Section 4: Seeking and Providing Support

You've enhanced your listening skills and prepared yourself for the sorts of challenges people commonly encounter after a disaster. Now, how do you get out there and support your community?

Step 1: Take Care of Yourself

You can't be a good peer listener if you are overwhelmed yourself. In addition to their own stress from the disaster, peer listeners may develop compassion fatigue. Coping skills can help the peer listener manage this combination of stressors.

Coping Skills

- Communicate your experience.
- Get physical exercise.
- Reestablish routines.
- Get good sleep.
- Eat nutritious food.
- Make room for humor and laughter.
- Practice relaxation or get a body massage.
- Do breathing exercises, stretching, or yoga.
- Talk to a friend.
- Spend time on your hobbies.
- Avoid making major life decisions.

Step 2: Be Clear About Your Role

As a peer listener, you support your community by active listening. You provide an opportunity for others to work through their feelings, explore their options, and become ready to act. As a peer listener, you offer your peers the valuable gifts of listening, acceptance, and sincere interest in their challenges. Knowing we are not alone gives us courage.

When needs arise that go beyond your capacity as a peer listener, you can connect people to other resources. See section Helping Someone to Seek Help below.

Offering Help

Helping is a process of enabling a person to solve a problem, face a crisis, or grow in the direction they choose. It is not your role as peer listener to decide whether help should be given. The individual or family needs to decide for themselves whether they want help at all and what kinds of help they are willing to receive. Your role is to be available.

It can be difficult for people to accept help, even when they recognize they need it. You can make it easier for others to accept help by your own attitudes. Affirm (for yourself and to them) that asking for and accepting help is a sign of strength and maturity.

When "Helpful" is Not Helping

- The helper fails to listen.

- The helper gives advice.
- The helper merely says, "I'm available," without follow-through.
- The helper gives false assurances.

Confidentiality

It can be hard to know when to maintain someone's trust and confidentiality versus when to break that trust in support of safety. If there is a risk of serious harm, violence, or suicide, you may have to break confidentiality. Make clear at the beginning of communication that you take privacy seriously and define exactly what situations would cause you to share something confidential.

Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries

Boundaries are important for you as a peer listener, both to support your own needs and to ensure you are not interfering with the efforts of professionals and formal supports.

Remember:

- Peer listeners are not mental health professionals. Do not attempt to diagnose or treat mental disorders.
- Peer listeners cannot provide disaster relief on their own. Relief agencies exist because no one person or family can support their entire community in a time of need.
- Peer listeners are not seeking gifts or rewards.
- Peer listeners do not have to be available 24/7.

Step 3: Initiate Contact

The Peer Listening Process

1. **Assure privacy, safety, and trust.** Let the person in crisis know that this is between the two of you—unless they plan to hurt themselves or someone else.
2. **Start with supporting responses.**
3. **Listen completely to the individual.** Listen for verbal and nonverbal signals. Listen to feelings communicated.
4. **Reflect back a feeling that you hear.** For example: "You're scared about where the money will come from, is that it?"
5. **Help the individual focus and clarify.** Sometimes people in crisis feel overwhelmed by too many issues. Focus on one at a time.
6. **Ask what options are available** to help remedy the problem: "What have you used in the past to help you? What are you considering now?"
7. **Research other options:** "I hear that the _____ has a good program on financial management. Would you want to give them a call?"
8. **Affirm confidence in the person's ability to make choices**: "I'm confident that you'll figure this out. I'm here to support you in your decision-making process."

9. **Follow up to discover what steps have been taken** and their success rates: "Last week you decided to make an appointment at _____. Did you have a chance to speak to anyone there? Did you find that helpful?"
10. **Begin the process again** for another problem area or let go. Allow the individual to continue their own journey or suggest other resources that may provide different assistance.

Step 4: Don't Hesitate to Get Help

When you hear someone express a need that they can't cope with themselves, you can offer support by suggesting resources and encouraging them to seek help. This may be professional help (legal, financial, emotional, or spiritual) or perhaps a support group.

As you connect them to resources, remind the person in need that you do care. You care enough to want the best possible help or service for them.

Helping Someone to Seek Help[xiv]

Before you decide it's too difficult to get the person in need to seek professional help, remember that your encouragement is important. Seeking help is a strength, not a weakness, and you may be able to help them understand this. Following are some tips to keep in mind as you encourage them to seek professional help.

1. **Plan a caring conversation.** If possible, try to talk when there is neither a rush nor distraction.
2. **Protect privacy.** Find a private space where no one will overhear and make sure there are no interruptions while you are talking.
3. **Tell them you care.** Let them know you see they are struggling and assure them the situation is not their fault.
4. **Discuss specific concerns.** Focus on their behaviors that concern you. You might include signs like withdrawal, anger, self-destructive actions, lack of sleep, or loss of appetite.
5. **Ask what they think and feel.** This is where the probing and questioning responses come in.
6. **Anticipate possible barriers to their accepting help and offer alternatives.**
   Possible barriers may include:
   - Their feelings of shame for not being self-reliant through the disaster and aftermath.
   - Their fear of being labeled "crazy" for seeking professional help.
   - Their lack of knowledge about counselors who work with individuals struggling with problems like theirs, and thus not knowing what to expect.
   - The cost of consultation fees or transportation, which they may not be able to afford.
   - Their fears, anxiety, and vulnerability in confronting a problem and accepting counseling to change the problem.
7. **Express your willingness to help them find assistance.** And then follow through in helping them find assistance.

8. **Emphasize the benefits.** For example, professional assistance may help them become more independent and in control of their own lives. It may also help reduce the overwhelming emotions that keep them from doing the things they want to do.
9. **Continue to be supportive.** Keep showing up.
10. **Encourage them to join a support group.**

Conclusions

This manual has presented information on how to be a peer listener and help rebuild communities following a disaster. A peer listener is not a replacement for formal supports. Instead, a peer listener is someone who cares and demonstrates that caring. Peer listeners fill the important role of supporting the emotional healing of their community by listening. When people feel heard and cared for, they can start to rebuild their lives and trust in the future. When life feels out of control, having someone actively listen can lead to healing.

Additional Resources

Suicide Prevention

- https://www.ccthita.org/services/family/prevent/SuicidePreventionBooklet.pdf
- https://health.alaska.gov/SuicidePrevention/Documents/pdfs_sspc/PostventionGuide-2020.pdf
- https://health.alaska.gov/SuicidePrevention/Documents/230301_StatePlan_SuicidePrevention.pdf
- Suicide and Crisis Lifeline
    - Call "988" from any phone in the U.S. to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline
    - https://health.alaska.gov/dbh/Pages/Prevention/988/default.aspx

Violence Prevention and Crisis Lines

- Abused Women's Aid in Crisis (AWAIC) statewide 24-hour crisis line (Alaska)
    - (907) 272-0100
- Cordova Family Resource Center (Alaska)
    - (907) 424-HELP (4357) or (866) 790-4357
- South Peninsula Haven House 24-hour crisis line (Homer, Alaska)
    - (907) 235-8943
- Kodiak Women's Resource and Crisis Center 24-hour crisis line (Alaska)
    - (907) 486-3625
- Seward Prevention Coalition 24-hour crisis line (Alaska)
    - (907) 362-1843
- Advocates for Victims of Violence 24-hour crisis line (Valdez, Alaska)
    - (907) 835-2999
- https://alaskamenchooserespect.org/
    - For men working to end violence and promote safe and respectful relationships
- https://www.thehotline.org/
    - For intimate partner violence
- https://www.rainn.org/about-national-sexual-assault-telephone-hotline
    - For sexual violence
- https://childhelphotline.org/
    - For violence against children
- Alaska Adult Protective Services reporting line for abuse or exploitation of vulnerable adults, including both elders and those with disabilities
    - (800) 478-9996

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