



Coping with Technological Disasters Appendix F:

Peer Listener Program

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

Previous versions of Appendix F included a Peer Listener Training session outline as well as materials for distribution during the training. Those materials are now outdated, given how the fields of peer-to-peer support and community resilience have evolved since this training was originally created in the mid-1990s. The Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council is currently working to update this material. Appendix F still provides an introduction and background information on the original program, as well as resource links for those looking for additional information.

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About the Peer Listening Training Program

The Peer Listener Training Program was designed to train local residents to provide peer support within disaster-impacted communities. The lay listener acts as an advisor, friend, and referral agent for individuals within a community who may not desire to seek professional services or may not know that help is available. The original Peer Listener Training Manual (created 1999, updated 2004) was developed 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.

Previous versions of Appendix F included a Peer Listener Training session outline as well as materials for distribution during the training. Those materials are now outdated, given how far the fields of peer-to-peer support and community resilience have evolved has evolved since this training was originally created in the mid-1990s. The Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council is currently working to update this material with an expected availability in late 2022. This appendix still provides an introduction and background information on the original program, as well as resource links for those looking for additional information.

Resource:

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 for the 2020 pandemic. Find out more about their program and manual at:

www.masgc.org/peer-listening/training

Community leaders interested in implementing a similar program should consider the following:

- Peer Listener Training should be conducted by qualified, local mental health professionals when possible, or non-local mental health professionals when necessary.
- Peer listeners should be individuals within a community who are highly trusted, dependable, and discreet resident volunteers. They should be representative of all cultural, ethnic, and age groups within the impacted community.
- During an event, the community may want to consider designating a coordinator to create a structured approach, develop a network, and ensure training takes place. Community leaders should continually follow up with peer listeners to receive feedback and provide additional training and referral organizations when needed.
- Local mental health professionals and community support organizations may be an excellent resource to supplement certain training sessions.

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. The Peer Listener Training Program was designed to help with community recovery processes and to target audiences that are impacted by an oil spill, such as fishing communities or those highly dependent on subsistence. A Peer Listener Training Program can be useful for other community-impacting emergencies as well. For instance, coping activities were also provided in the Gulf of Mexico region during the COVID-19 pandemic to help with the stresses from this event.

While the most prevalent short-term concerns following a disaster are ecological and economic, over time there are more diffuse effects on the community. Joblessness and extended litigation can lead to anger, depression, alienation, and a loss of trust. With these emotions, comes an increase in problems, from professional to personal and family.

Research regarding disaster effects on rural communities has shown that many of the people who are affected by disasters are reluctant to use traditional mental health services, particularly when the disaster is human-caused. Peer networks have been shown to be an effective way to support community and individual recovery.

Through training, peer listeners have a unique opportunity to assist their family and friends with ongoing concerns and can provide a number of services to the community. A peer listener serves as an empathetic ear and may provide referral to more formal sources of support. Talking with someone who truly knows you and your community can be beneficial in helping an individual feel understood.

Since peer listeners are members of the community, they are more likely to be trusted, while also having a greater understanding of the effects of the disaster. In addition, peer listeners know the people in the community who are in need, as well as the community resources which are available. By combining these individuals with training, they can be highly suited to provide support.

The Peer Listener Training Program was meant to be inclusive and to train individuals from the broader community to be peer listeners. While intended to support recovery from the long-term effects of a disaster, this network can remain in the community as an ongoing resource, as long as the community sees a need for it and is committed to supporting it. This could allow the network to be in place and available should future disasters impact the community.

About Social Support

We all need a network of friends and neighbors who support us through good times and bad. A "social support system" includes people who live and work with us; people we share ideas and feelings with; people who celebrate successes with us and who bring us up when we are feeling down.

Many people who survive a disaster experience a strong desire to separate from others. They withdraw, even from the people they are closest to. It's hard to face people when even a casual, "How are you doing?" can be difficult to answer. But ongoing avoidance of family, friends, and strangers make

And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

- Robert Fulgram

everything harder for everyone. It's an odd irony that we're most likely to turn away from people right when we need them most. Overcoming the tendency to isolate takes real strength and discipline.

Research shows that people who see being able to ask for help as a strength come through disasters stronger and healthier than those who view seeking help as a weakness. Some people say they are "too proud" to ask for help. Yet even these people probably have asked for help at one time or another. Somehow when a crisis occurs, we can forget there are people ready and willing to help us. Peer listeners provide support to people who are seeking support, but more importantly, are a source of support to those who are uncomfortable asking for it.

Communication Skills

We chose the term peer listener to emphasize **the importance of listening over giving advice or solving problems**. While certainly part of this role is to help people, listening is the peer listener's best tool.

Active listening uses specific techniques of listening to and reflecting back feelings. While the urge will be to solve the problem of the person struggling, listening will serve to help understand them and to help them understand themselves. Most of us need a sounding board at some time or another.

If in listening to peers, you can, with caring and empathy, reflect back to them their feelings and thoughts, they will begin to see their situation more clearly and hear the messages from their own hearts. By listening in an accepting and non-judgmental manner, you provide for them a safe environment in which they can explore other sides of themselves which they may not have explored alone. And further, by listening and accepting, you allow them to find the strength within themselves to develop the best solution for their problem.

Communication connects people. We need to feel that whoever listens to us is nonjudgmental, empathetic, and compassionate. We benefit from having our distress acknowledged rather than given platitudes to make it "feel better." We need to feel that the listener is focused completely on our dialogue. In this connection between speaker and listener, we need to feel trust and safety.

In any crisis situation, communicating our feelings to another is an important step to healing and coping. In fact, research has shown that people who are able to talk about their problems in a trusting situation have fewer physical and emotional symptoms. Effective communication can break barriers and open channels of hope. We all need a sense of inclusion, respect, and acknowledgement -- particularly in difficult times. The goal of a Peer Listener Training program is to teach active listening to create important links for the healing process after a disaster.

Overview of the Original Training

Session I Introduction & Disasters and Mental Health:

The first portion of the training reviewed the purpose of the Peer Listener program. It was intended that peer listeners may be available through local agencies, as well as individually seeking out people in need. Ideally, a local agency would allow peer listeners to be stationed there on a scheduled basis, so that community members would know how, when, and where they could meet with a peer listener. While peer listeners will be asked to make an initial time commitment, the program is entirely voluntary.

The first session provided an overview of the short and long-term effects of disasters, particularly technological disasters, with a focus on the emotional effects, such as depression, alienation, family problems, etc. Information regarding the actual effects on the Cordova community in Alaska following the Exxon Valdez spill were presented based on past and present research by Dr. Picou and his associates.

Session II Communication Skills:

Due to the interpersonal nature of the training, activities to increase people's comfort in talking about and listening to sensitive issues were conducted. Listener trainees were encouraged to talk about their own experiences since the Exxon Valdez oil spill and their perceptions of the changes in the community, as well as the areas/people in need of intervention. Listeners were provided training in empathic listening and communication. While many people are "naturally" good listeners, there are specific skills involved in active listening. Peer listeners were trained in nonverbal aspects of communication, active listening, and how to respond to people.

Session III Dealing with Anger:

A common after-effect of technological disasters is anger. While anger towards the actual entities involved in the disaster is certainly justified, often this anger spills over into other relationships, or even worse, into a general anger and lack of distrust towards everyone. Peer Listeners were trained how to better understand anger as a response, listen to anger, and manage anger in a productive manner.

Session IV Common Concerns:

Many of the long-term effects of disaster involve exacerbation of common domestic and personal problems. Peer Listeners were introduced to common concerns including marital problems, domestic violence, child abuse, childhood behavioral and emotional problems, substance abuse, depression, and suicide. Strategies for how a peer could address these concerns were presented in the training, including how to recognize more serious issues and make referrals to formal support services.

Session V Support Seeking:

During times of stress, social isolation is a frequent, maladaptive reaction. Peer listeners were educated regarding the benefits of social support and the ways in which individuals can best be supportive to people in need. One of the functions of the peer listeners will be to serve as an additional community mechanism for social support. At the same time, the peer listeners will help individuals to better use their own networks of social support.

An overview of community resources for support was included. Peer listeners were provided training to know when they should recommend an individual seek help at a formal agency, rather than relying on the Peer Listener network.

Additional Resources

Children and Teens

“Tips for Talking With and Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Disaster or Traumatic Event: A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers,” available from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration. (SAMSA)

<https://store.samhsa.gov/product/tips-talking-helping-children-youth-cope-after-disaster-or-traumatic-event-guide-parents/>

“Disasters and Child Abuse: A Fact Sheet for Disaster Responders and Providers,” by the University of Missouri’s Disaster and Community Crisis Center and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), 2016.

www.dcc.missouri.edu/assets/doc/dcc_child_abuse_and_disasters.pdf

“What Is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms,” by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (DHHS) Child Welfare Information Gateway.

www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/whatiscan.pdf

“Factors that Contribute to Child Abuse and Neglect,” DHHS, Child Welfare Information Gateway.

www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/factors/

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

www.nctsn.org

Coping with Disasters and Traumatic Events

“Tips for Survivors of a Disaster or Other Traumatic Events, Managing Stress”

<https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Tips-for-Survivors-of-a-Disaster-or-Other-Traumatic-Event-Managing-Stress/SMA13-4776>

“Coping Tips for Traumatic Events and Disasters”

www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/coping-tips

SAMSHA also provides a National Disaster Distress Helpline at:

1-800-985-5990 or text “TalkWithUs” to 66746

Center for Disease Control, resources for children, community leaders and emergency responders.

<https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/index.asp>

Depression

National Institute of Mental Health

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml>

Center for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db303.htm>

Disaster Research

The Exxon and BP oil spills: a comparison of psychosocial impacts by Duane A. Gill, Liesel A. Ritchie, J. Steven Picou, et al, 2014. Originally printed in the November 2014 issue of Natural Hazards.

<http://stevenpicou.com/pdfs/the-exxon-and-bp-oil-spills-a-comparison.pdf>

Observations, 25 years since the Exxon Valdez by Duane A. Gill, Liesel A. Ritchie, J. Steven Picou Originally printed in the November 2014 issue of Natural Hazards.

<http://stevenpicou.com/pdfs/the-exxon-and-bp-oil-spills-a-comparison.pdf>

“Emergency Responders: Tips for taking care of yourself,” Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

<https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp>.

Domestic Violence

Bureau of Justice Statistics

https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/newsroom/c-span/2014/20141010_cspan_domestic_violence.pdf

Elders

“Elderly People With Disabilities And Natural Disasters: Vulnerability Of Seniors And Post Trauma,” by Danielle Maltais, originally published in the Journal of Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine. Available from Herald Scholarly Open Access.

<https://www.heraldopenaccess.us/openaccess/elderly-people-with-disabilities-and-natural-disasters-vulnerability-of-seniors-and-post-trauma>

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Department of Veterans Affairs

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/publications/print/index.asp>

Substance Abuse

National Institute of Health’s Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/alcohol-facts-and-statistics>

National Institute of Mental Health

<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/alcohol-facts-and-statistics>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

<https://www.samhsa.gov/node/728047>

Suicide Prevention

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Alaska: <https://afsp.org/chapter/alaska>

Nationwide: <https://afsp.org/>

Alaska’s Suicide Prevention and Someone-to-talk-to Line +1 (877) 266-4357

Suicide Prevention Resource Center

Alaska: <https://www.sprc.org/states/alaska>

Find help in other states: <https://www.sprc.org/states/>

Center for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/suicide/index.html>

Southcentral Foundation's Suicide Prevention and Awareness Resources

<https://www.southcentralfoundation.com/services/behavioral-health/support-services/suicide-prevention/>

Alaska Department of Health and Human Services's Statewide Suicide Prevention Council

<http://dhss.alaska.gov/suicideprevention/Pages/default.aspx>

Bibliography

This bibliography was provided at the beginning of the original Peer Listener Training Manual (dated 1996) in order to offer some reference materials with additional background information, which may assist trainers in preparing for and putting together their Peer Listener Training sessions. Links are provided for easy access to obtain copies of books or online information.

Anger

- [Anger, the Misunderstood Emotion](#). Carol Tavris
- [Angry all the time](#). Ron-Potter-Efron
- [I.A.M.: A common sense guide to coping with anger](#). Melvyn L. Fein
- [Managing Anger](#). Mitchell H. Messer, Roman Coronado-Bogdaniak, Linda J. Dillon
- [The Anger Workbook](#). Lorraine Bilodeau

Anxiety and PTSD

- [Anxiety, Phobias, and Panic](#). Reneau Z. Peurifoy
- [I Can't Get Over It: A handbook for trauma survivors](#). Aphrodite Matsakis
- [The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook](#). Edmund J. Bourne

Depression

- [Living without Depression & Manic Depression](#). Mary Ellen Copeland
- [Overcoming Depression](#). Demetri Papolos and Janice Papolos
- [The Depression Workbook](#). Mary Ellen Copeland
- [The Good News About Depression](#). Mark S. Gold
- [The Feeling Good Handbook](#). David D. Burns

Family Issues

- [A Couple's Guide to Communication](#). John Mordecai Gottman
- [Breaking Free from Domestic Violence](#). Jerry Brinegar
- [Children and Trauma](#). Cynthia Monahon
- [Parenting your Teenager](#). David Elkind
- [Playful Parenting](#). Denise Chapman Weston and Mark Weston The Good Marriage. Judith Wallerstein & Sandra Blakeslee
- [The Verbally Abusive Relationship](#). Patricia Evans
- [Violent No More](#). Michael Paymar

Substance Abuse

- [Getting Started in A.A.](#) Hamilton B.
- [Sober but Stuck](#). Dan F.
- [When A.A. Doesn't Work For You](#). Albert Ellis and Emmett Velten