

COUNSELOR SUPPORT GUIDE

A trauma-informed, culturally grounded guide for supporting individuals, families, and communities during disaster recovery.



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01

PURPOSE OF THE GUIDE

This guide equips counselors with clear, practical ways to help individuals and families:

- Manage trauma reactions
- Stabilize after crisis
- Cope with loss and displacement
- Rebuild emotional safety
- Reconnect to community supports
- Navigate the unique stressors of slow recovery

It assumes counselors may be operating under **strained conditions**—crowded shelters, limited privacy, limited resources, and emotionally overwhelmed communities.



02

COUNSELOR ROLES
DURING
DISASTER RECOVERY

Primary Responsibilities

- Provide psychological first aid (PFA)
- Reduce distress and stabilize emotions
- Normalize reactions to trauma
- Strengthen coping skills
- Support parents and caregivers
- Provide brief counseling interventions
- Connect individuals to services
- Facilitate group support in shelters
- Identify risks and escalate when needed

Secondary Responsibilities

- Assist schools with reintegration of students
- Provide guidance to shelter staff
- Help families rebuild routines
- Support community organizations in emotional care planning



03

UNDERSTANDING POST-DISASTER STRESS RESPONSES

How Stress Manifests in the Body

- Stomach upset
- Headaches
- Trembling or shakiness
- Muscle tension
- Exhaustion
- Sleep disturbance
- Chronic alertness (“hypervigilance”)

Cognitive Responses

- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory lapses
- Intrusive thoughts
- Catastrophic thinking
- Indecisiveness

Emotional Responses

- Irritability
- Grief
- Numbness
- Fear
- Overwhelm
- Guilt
- Helplessness

Behavioral Responses

- Withdrawal
- Outbursts
- Increased conflict
- Overworking
- Avoidance
- Risk-taking behaviors (teens especially)

Counselor Tip:

Normalize all trauma reactions with this phrase:

“Your body and mind are having a normal response to an overwhelming situation.”



04

TRAUMA-INFORMED COUNSELING PRINCIPLES

1. Safety Before Insight

People cannot “process” trauma until they feel grounded.

2. Empowerment Over Control

Provide choices, ask permission, respect pacing.

3. Collaboration

Avoid the “expert stance”; survivors are active participants.

4. Cultural Humility

Honor language, faith practices, local traditions, and community norms.

5. Transparency

Explain what you’re doing and why.

6. Strength-Based Framing

Highlight resilience, resourcefulness, and community connection.



05

FIRST CONTACT: STABILIZING & BUILDING SAFETY

a. Establishing an Emotional Baseline

Ask:

- “How has the last day or two been for you?”
- “Where are you feeling the stress in your body?”
- “What feels hardest right now?”

b. Quick Grounding Tools for First Contact

1. 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding (Disaster Edition)

Especially useful when survivors are overwhelmed in shelters.

2. Warm Voice, Slow Pace

Your tone becomes a stabilizing anchor.

3. Breath Reset

Inhale 3, exhale 4. Repeat 3-5 cycles.

4. Sensory Stabilizers

Provide:

- Water
- Cool cloth
- Quiet corner
- Grounding object (stone, card, pen, etc.)

For a detailed description on how to use each skill please visit Bahali.org.

5. Validate & Normalize

Use:

- “It makes sense you feel this way.”
- “Many people experience this after something big.”

c. Help Survivors Reclaim Control

Offer small choices:

- Where to sit
- Whether they prefer talking or grounding first
- If they want privacy or a brief check-in

Choice restores dignity.



06

EMOTIONAL & COGNITIVE SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS

A. Cognitive Coping

Identify Unhelpful Thoughts

Common after disasters:

- “I should have done more.”
- “This is all my fault.”
- “We’ll never recover.”
- “My children will never be okay.”

Shift Toward Balanced Thoughts

- “We survived something unimaginable.”
- “Recovery takes time—one step at a time.”
- “I’m doing the best I can under very hard circumstances.”

b. Emotional Processing – Without Forcing Disclosure

Gently allow storytelling only if the client wants to.

Helpful prompts:

- “What moment stands out the most for you?”
- “What’s been the biggest challenge today?”
- “Is there anything you wish someone understood about your experience?”

Avoid:

- Pushy questions
- Graphic details
- “Tell me everything that happened.”

c. Body-Based Regulation

Teach survivors:

- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Slow breathing practices
- Grounding through feet, hands, chair
- Gentle movement breaks

These regulate the nervous system faster than talk alone.



07

WORKING WITH CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS

a. Children

Common post-disaster child reactions

- Regression
- Clinginess
- Irritability
- Somatic complaints
- Repetitive questions
- Nighttime fear

Counseling Tools

- Story-based processing
- Play materials (drawings, puppets, cards)
- Emotion naming
- Grounding games
- Sensory kits

Script for explaining disaster stress to a child:

“Your body got a big scare, and now it’s acting like it needs extra help. We can teach it to feel safe again.”

b. Teens

Common reactions

- Withdrawal
- Anger
- Risky behavior
- Shutting down
- Embarrassment about displacement

Counseling Tools for Teens

- Journaling
- Cool-down walks
- Making recovery plans
- Cognitive reframing
- Validating identity struggles
- Creating privacy pockets in shelters



08

SUPPORTING PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

What Parents Need Most

- Reassurance that their reactions are normal
- Guidance on children's behavioral changes
- Help reducing guilt and self-blame
- Tools for rebuilding routines
- Calm-down strategies for adults

Counselor Scripts

- “Your child’s behavior is communication, not misbehavior.”
- “You don’t need to be perfect—just steady enough.”
- “Your calm helps their calm.”



09

WORKING WITH OLDER ADULTS & SENIORS

Common Senior Reactions

- Fear of being a burden
- Shame about needing help
- Confusion or slowed processing
- Grief for lost community routines
- Chronic pain worsening under stress

Ways to support seniors

- Slow pace, gentle tone
- Repeat information with patience
- Incorporate spiritual and cultural practices
- Encourage meaningful roles
- Ensure physical safety and comfort
- Watch for cognitive decline worsened by stress



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**CULTURAL & COMMUNITY
CONSIDERATIONS IN THE
CARIBBEAN**

Counselors should incorporate:

- Faith-based coping
- Communal identity (“we” over “I”)
- Extended family systems
- Storytelling traditions
- Music, prayer, and shared meals
- Respectful acknowledgment of historical trauma
- Stigma around mental health

Keep language simple, warm, and culturally grounded.



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MANAGING GRIEF, LOSS & DISPLACEMENT

Visible Loss

- Homes
- Belongings
- Income
- Community spaces

Invisible Loss

- Safety
- Routines
- Identity
- Predictability
- Independence

Grief Tools

- Memory stones
- Storytelling
- Legacy items
- Honoring rituals
- Group reflection circles

Normalize the waves:

“Grief moves like the sea – calm one moment, strong the next. Both are natural.”



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**GROUP SUPPORT
& COMMUNITY
HEALING CIRCLES**

Group Goals

- Reduce isolation
- Build community strength
- Encourage venting in a safe structure
- Normalize trauma responses
- Support problem-solving

Healing Circle Structure

1. Welcome & grounding
2. Safety guidelines
3. Check-in round
4. Sharing & witnessing
5. Problem-solving
6. Closing ritual (breathing, prayer, affirmation, song)



13

SAFETY ASSESSMENT & CRISIS RESPONSE

Red Flags Requiring Immediate Action

- Suicidal thoughts
- Harm to others
- Uncontrolled panic
- Hallucinations
- Severe dissociation
- Aggressive behavior
- Inability to care for children

Action Steps

1. Stay calm
2. Ground the person
3. Remove them from overwhelming space
4. Engage crisis protocols
5. Contact emergency or referral services
6. Document briefly and factually



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REFERRAL PATHWAYS & DOCUMENTATION

What to Document

- Observed behavior
- Emotional state
- Interventions used
- Risk indicators
- Referrals made
- Follow-up needs

How to Refer

- Offer options, not directives
- Explain what to expect
- Help complete forms if needed
- Check for transportation or access barriers



15

COUNSELOR SELF-CARE & BURNOUT PREVENTION

Signs of Overload

- Irritability
- Numbness
- Poor sleep
- Overworking
- Compassion fatigue
- Hopelessness

Protective Strategies

- Peer check-ins
- Rotating roles
- Grounding breaks
- Limiting exposure to traumatic stories
- Spiritual/communal coping
- Hydration, rest
- Boundaries (“I can support you, but I need a break to stay effective.”)

Repeat to yourself:

“I am not responsible for fixing everything. I am responsible for being present and steady.”



16

**DO / DON'T QUICK
REFERENCE**

DO

- Listen with compassion
- Speak slowly
- Normalize reactions
- Provide choices
- Ground before processing
- Respect cultural practices
- Use simple tools

DON'T

- Force storytelling
- Minimize feelings
- Make promises
- Overwhelm with information
- Rush the recovery timeline
- Judge coping styles
- Pathologize normal stress responses



17

CLOSING MESSAGE FOR COUNSELORS

Your work is a lifeline.

In moments of chaos, you help restore steadiness.

In moments of grief, you offer presence.

In moments of overwhelm, you guide people back to themselves.

Your impact is profound, even when it feels invisible.

You are part of the healing of the community—one conversation, one grounding breath, one moment of compassion at a time.