

The Emotional Response to Disasters

Everyone who lives through a disaster or traumatic event is touched by the experience. If you are separated or far away from family and friends during a disaster, you can feel even more stress and anxiety. Such events can threaten our sense of control and safety and can affect many aspects of our lives. Even if we learn that our loved ones are safe, some of the emotional impact of the experience can linger.

Not recognizing that we are under stress, or not managing that stress, can impact our physical and mental health. You can help reduce possible long-term problems if you deal with the emotional consequences of a violent or threatening situation as soon as possible. When we handle stress properly, we are better prepared to meet the challenges of recovering from exposure to violence. We can reclaim our sense of control and safety.

This brochure addresses the emotional impact of disasters, as well as strategies for coping. Remember that you don't have to go it alone! There are several services listed on this brochure that can assist you in managing the emotional consequences of these events. Please feel free to reach out to learn more.

Many Ways to React . . . Many Ways to Cope

Remember... there is no one correct way to react to a difficult or dangerous event. Not everyone reacts the same way. In fact, you may react in a variety of different ways even in the course of the same day. Each person, family and community gets through the emotional challenges of a crisis in their own time and on their own terms.

The best predictor of how a person will react to a powerful or traumatic event is how they have reacted to other challenges in the past. Likewise, the best strategies for coping now are often those strategies that have worked well in the past.

You should use coping mechanisms that are familiar and comfortable to you to help you manage the emotions you feel during a crisis or stressful event.

Other ideas for coping are explored in this brochure and can be discussed with the counselors and other caregivers.

Sometimes helping others can make you feel better. Part of the frustration of a crisis is feeling helpless. If you can help in some small way, you feel more useful. Here are some reliable agencies that always need help during emergencies:

American Red Cross 1-800-REDCROSS or 1-800-257-7575 (Spanish) or online at www.redcross.org

Salvation Army
www.salvationarmynj.org

United Way World Disaster Fund
<https://volunteer.united-way.org/uwwwdisaster/donate/>

UNICEF: 1-800-4UNICEF
www.unicef.org

Predicting and Preparing for Emotional Reactions

Not everyone will have an immediate or obvious emotional reaction to a disaster. Those who do will react in their own unique way. Some typical emotional reactions may include:

- Recurring dreams or nightmares about the event;
- Trouble concentrating or remembering things;
- Feeling numb, withdrawn or disconnected;
- Disturbances in eating and sleeping patterns;
- Having bursts of anger or intense irritability;
- Persistent physical symptoms (i.e., headaches, digestive problems, muscle tension, etc.);
- Being overprotective of your family's safety;
- Avoiding reminders of the violent events or evacuation;
- Being tearful or crying for no apparent reason

What Helps...

Here are some useful suggestions for how to cope with the stress of disasters and/or traumatic events:

- Limit your exposure to graphic news stories;
- Get accurate, timely information about the status of the situation from credible sources;
- Try to return to your normal daily routine;
- Exercise, eat well and rest;
- Stay busy - physically and mentally;
- Communicate with friends, family and supporters;
- Turn to your spirituality, religion or personal belief system.

What Doesn't Help

There are several behaviors that can slow the emotional recovery process, or make it worse. These include:

- Using drugs or alcohol to cope;
- Withdrawing from friends or family;
- Blaming others;
- Overeating or failing to eat;
- Withdrawing from pleasant activities;
- Working too much;
- Anger or acting out violently.

Staying Connected

The best way to deal with these fragile emotions or uncontrollable responses to a disaster is often found in each other. If you are anxious about your experience, talk to someone you love or trust. This may be a family member, friend, clergy member or teacher. Just don't keep your thoughts and feelings to yourself.

If you notice that a loved one, friend or co-worker's behavior has markedly changed, reach out. Ask them how they are doing. Make some time to talk, when it is convenient for both of you. Follow up later on to see how they are doing. Watching out for each other shows that you care, and it can be comforting to both of you.

If you or someone that you know is having an acute emotional reaction that does not get better in a few days, it may be best to seek the assistance of a medical or mental health professional.

After the crisis...

For people returning home from a disaster-affected area, it is not uncommon to experience difficulty in "decompressing" and reintegrating back into the home and workplace.

For lists of credible international emergency response agencies and charities, contact the Center for International Disaster Information: www.cidi.org/incident/haiti-10a

Coping with the Emotional Impact of Disasters



Helping Yourself & Others

NJ Department of Human Services

Division of Mental Health Services
Disaster and Terrorism Branch

Online at:

www.disastermentalhealthnj.com

Toll Free Helpline
877-294-HELP (4357)

TTY Line
877-294-4356