

Coping Emotionally After a Disaster

The emotional toll that disaster brings can sometimes be even more devastating than the financial strains of damage and loss of home, business or personal property. Be conscious of how a disaster influences people's emotions, and do what is necessary to treat yourself or others who have been impacted by these stressful events.

Understanding the Impact of a Disaster

The emotional toll a disaster takes on people can be difficult to measure and define. Consider the following facts about human reactions to disaster:

- Everyone who sees or experiences a disaster is affected by it in some way.
- It is normal to feel anxious about your own safety and that of your family and close friends.
- Profound sadness, grief and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Acknowledging your feelings helps you recover.
- Focusing on your strengths and abilities helps you heal.
- Accepting help from community programs and resources is healthy.
- Everyone has different needs and different ways of coping.
- It is common to want to strike back at people who have caused great pain.

Children and older adults are of special concern in the aftermath of disasters. Even individuals who experience a disaster "second hand" through exposure to extensive media coverage can be affected.

If you have experienced a disaster, consider contacting local faith-based organizations, voluntary agencies or professional counselors for counseling. Additionally, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and state and local governments of the affected area may provide crisis counseling assistance.

Recognizing Signs of Disaster-related Stress

When people display the following signs and symptoms after a disaster, they might need crisis counseling or stress management assistance:

- Difficulty communicating thoughts
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty maintaining balance in their lives
- Low threshold of frustration
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol
- Limited attention span
- Poor work performance
- Headaches/stomach problems
- Tunnel vision/muffled hearing
- Colds or flu-like symptoms
- Disorientation or confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Reluctance to leave home
- Depression, sadness
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Mood-swings and easy bouts of crying

- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt
- Fear of crowds, strangers or being alone

Easing Disaster-related Stress

The following are ways to ease disaster-related stress:

- Talk with someone about your feelings, such as anger, sorrow and other emotions, even though it may be difficult.
- Seek help from professional counselors who deal with post-disaster stress.
- Do not hold yourself responsible for the disastrous event or be frustrated because you feel you cannot help directly in the rescue work.
- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing by healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation and meditation.
- Maintain a normal family and daily routine, limiting demanding responsibilities on yourself and your family.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Participate in memorials.
- Use existing support groups of family, friends and religious institutions.
- Ensure you are ready for future events by restocking your disaster supplies kits and updating your family disaster plan. Doing these positive actions can be comforting.

Resources

- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: www.aacap.org
- American Red Cross: www.redcross.org
- Anxiety Disorders Association of America: www.adaa.org
- Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists: www.atss.info
- Mental Health America: www.mentalhealthamerica.net
- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml

Some content on this page was gathered from the website for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The website is located at www.fema.gov.

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