

Coping with a disaster

Information for times of stress



Queensland
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Queensland Health

A disaster will effect different people in different ways. This information is a guide only, to some of the effects that a disaster might have on your thoughts, feelings and actions. It also includes some helpful suggestions to assist you to cope with a disaster.

Coping with disasters

People are usually surprised at how much a disaster or crisis affects them. It frequently changes the way they think, their values, habits, feelings and behaviours. In fact, it may influence most aspects of their life.

Even though the event may be over, you may now be experiencing or may experience later some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact quite normal for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have passed through a horrible event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With the understanding and the support of loved ones, stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counsellor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular trauma was just too powerful to manage without help.

Helpful things to do

A few simple things will help families recover from a disaster:

Keep communicating. Talk about what is happening, how members feel, what they need from each other. This avoids feeling alone, isolated and not understood. Communicate with teenagers, children and toddlers. They know something is going on, and reality is always easier to deal with than the unknown.

Do things together. Ensure time is reserved for recreation, enjoyment and rewarding experiences. Shared pleasure carries a family through many difficulties.

Keep family roles clear. Don't allow children to take too much responsibility for too long even if they want to care for a distressed parent. Help members preserve their status and support them. Don't over-protect children or adults. Understand if a family member cannot fulfil their role for a time, and talk about how they will resume when they are ready and able.

Be active. Tackle problems, seek help, seek information, don't let small issues build up.

Allow expression of emotions in children and adults. Support the distressed member and allow them time to work through it.

Use other people. Keep in contact with support groups, other family, friends, neighbours, workmates. Make sure the family doesn't become isolated and too involved with itself. Share the experience with those you trust.

More information about disasters and their effects on children and teenagers, can be found in the leaflet titled 'Helping children and young people cope with disasters'.

The disaster & your family

People have many different ways of describing their family. Usually, people do not expect their families to be affected. But a disaster or crisis in the life of one person always influences their family. Although it is made up of individuals, a family is an interrelated group. What changes one member, changes the others.

A crisis or disaster can bring benefits to a family in the form of greater understanding, closeness or a new appreciation of each other.

Sometimes it can bring difficulties and misunderstanding, especially if family members do not understand why they are having to adapt to each other in new ways.

Most families have the ability to grow through crisis. But understanding its effects is necessary. If you are concerned about yourself, your partner, children or parents, do not hesitate to contact someone trained to help assess the situation and advise you. A little help from a trained person early can avoid long-term difficulty and give family members back confidence in themselves and each other.

See the back of this booklet for information about where advice or assistance can be obtained.

Normal feelings & emotions experienced

You may experience some of the following:

Shock and disbelief. The event seems to be unreal, like a film or a dream.

Numbness. Your emotions are cut off.

Fear:

Of death, of injury or harm to yourself or those you love

Of being left alone, or having to leave loved ones

Of 'breaking down' or 'losing control'

Of a similar event happening again.

Helplessness. You may feel overwhelmed. Longing for all that has gone and will not be.

Guilt:

For not having helped or saved others

For being alive and uninjured

For being better off than others, having things

Regret for things not done.

Shame:

For not having felt and reacted as you would have wished

For having been helpless, 'emotional' and needing others

Sadness for deaths, injuries and losses of every kind.

Euphoria. Joy of survival, feeling high, excited, close to everyone.

Anger and frustration:

At what happened, whoever caused it or allowed it to happen

At the injustice and senselessness of it all

At the shame and indignities

'Why me'.

Let down. Disappointments, which alternate with.....

Hope for the future, for better times.

These feelings are common and normal, and nature heals through expressing them. Expressing your emotions and feelings does not mean that you are out of control, or having a nervous breakdown. Even intense feelings only occur for limited periods. They can be dealt with, and you can put them on hold when necessary.

You or others may block feelings for fear that they are too painful. The most common ways of blocking are cutting off feelings and being busy.

Sometimes you may not be able to express or deal with your feelings immediately. Then your reactions may take months or even years to be experienced. The earlier you are able to deal with these feelings, the sooner your healing begins. Prolonged blocking of feelings may lead to difficulties.

Physical reactions

Your body as well as your mind may be affected immediately or even many months later.

Common reactions include:

- Tiredness, shakes, dizziness, racing heart
- Difficulty breathing, choking in the throat and chest pains
- Nausea, diarrhoea, vomiting
- Muscular tension or pain, headaches, neck or back pain
- Menstrual disorder
- Changes to sexual desire or activity

Infections frequently occur when you are run down. Alcohol, coffee and drug intake may increase due to extra tension. Accidents are more frequent after severe stress.

What you can do for yourself

- Give yourself permission and TIME to grieve.
- Don't bottle up your feelings.
- Focus on your strengths and coping skills.
- Ask for support and help from your family, friends, social or community groups. Join or develop support groups.
- Redefine your priorities and focus your energy and resources on those priorities.
- Set small realistic goals to help tackle obstacles. For example, re-establish daily routines for yourself and your family.
- Clarify feelings and assumptions about your partner. Remember that people can react differently. Some tend to be caretakers and put others first. Others may have difficulty acknowledging and expressing feelings of helplessness and sadness and believe in 'toughing it out'.
- Eat healthy meals and exercise.
- Get enough rest to increase your reserve strength.
- Acknowledge unresolved issues and use the hurt and pain as a motivator to make the necessary changes to heal.
- Continue to educate yourself and family about normal reactions to a disaster.
- Talk to your children. Be supportive. Don't be afraid to express your feelings.
- Remember that you are not alone.

Remember that many responses are NORMAL in the face of an ABNORMAL situation.

Seek assistance if:

- Having recurring thoughts or nightmares about the event.
- Having trouble sleeping or changes in appetite.
- Experiencing anxiety and fear, especially when exposed to events or situations reminiscent of the trauma.
- Feeling on edge, being easily startled or becoming overly alert.
- Feeling depressed, sad and having low energy.
- Experiencing memory problems including difficulty in remembering aspects of the trauma.
- Feeling 'scattered' and unable to focus on work or daily activities. Having difficulty making decisions.
- Feeling irritable, easily agitated, or angry and resentful.
- Feeling emotionally 'numb', withdrawn, disconnected or different from others.
- Spontaneously crying, feeling a sense of despair and hopelessness.
- Feeling extremely protective of, or fearful for, the safety of loved ones.
- Not being able to face certain aspects of the trauma, and avoiding activities, places, or even people that remind you of the event.

Advice and help about coping with a disaster can be obtained from:

Mental Health Service

School Support Service

Your GP

Other

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