

Handling Stressful Events with Self Care:

The Aftermath of Stressful Events

Natural disasters such as tornados, floods or widespread illness are extraordinarily stressful—both to survivors and observers. Such events shatter one’s sense of security, often making one feel helpless and vulnerable. Even if one is not directly impacted by the event, it is normal to feel anxious, scared, and uncertain about what the future may bring. Usually, these unsettling thoughts and feelings diminish as life starts to return to normal but one can assist the process by keeping the following in mind:

- **People react in different ways to natural disasters and traumatic events.** There is no “right” or “wrong” way to think, feel, or respond. Be tolerant of one’s own reactions and feelings, as well as the reactions and feelings of others.
- **Ignoring one’s feelings will slow the healing process.** It may seem better in the moment to avoid experiencing one’s emotions, but they exist whether one is paying attention to them or not.
- **Talking about what one is feeling will help one heal.** Just as one may find it difficult to face one’s feelings head on, one may also find it difficult to express those feelings to others. Talking with a calm, caring person is best, but expressing one’s feelings through journaling, art, and other creative outlets can also help.

Common Reactions

It’s normal to feel a wide range of intense emotions and physical reactions. These emotional reactions often come and go in waves.

Normal Emotional Responses	Physical Stress Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shock and Disbelief – One may have a hard time accepting the reality of what happened • Fear – That the same thing will happen again, or that one will lose control or break down • Sadness – Particularly if people one knows have died • Helplessness – The sudden, unpredictable nature of natural disasters and accidents may leave one feeling vulnerable and helpless • Guilt – That you were okay when others weren’t • Anger – At those who one feels may be responsible • Shame – Especially over feelings or fears one can’t control • Relief – One may feel relieved that the worst is over, and even hopeful that one’s life will return to normal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trembling or shaking • Pounding heart • Rapid breathing • Lump in throat; feeling choked up • Stomach tightening or churning • Feeling dizzy or faint • Cold sweats • Racing thoughts

Tips for Recovery

Seek Comfort and Support	Minimize Media Exposure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reestablish a routine: As much as possible, resume normal routines and activities • Connect with others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spend time with loved ones. • Connect with other survivors of the traumatic event or disaster. • Do “normal” things with other people, things that have nothing to do with the disaster. • Participate in memorials, events, and other public rituals. • Take advantage of existing support groups: your church, community organizations, and tight-knit groups of family and friends. 	<p>Some may regain a sense of control by watching media coverage of the event or observing the recovery effort. Others find the reminders upsetting. Excessive exposure may be further traumatizing—in fact, re-traumatization is common.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit your media exposure to the disaster. Do not watch the news just before bed. Take a complete break if the coverage is making you feel overwhelmed • Information gathering is healthy, but try to avoid morbid preoccupation with distressing images and video clips. Read the newspaper or magazines rather than watching television. • Protect one’s children from seeing or hearing unnecessary reminders of the traumatic event • After viewing disaster coverage, talk with one’s loved ones about the footage and what you’re feeling. <p>Source: <i>Emotional First Aid</i>, Gina Ross, MFCC, and Peter Levine, Ph.D.</p>

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Make Stress Reduction a Priority	How Sleep Helps
<p>Almost everyone experiences signs of stress after going through a traumatic event. While a certain amount of stress is normal, and even helpful, as you face the challenges that come in the aftermath of a disaster, too much stress will get in the way of recovery.</p>	<p>After experiencing a stressful event, you may find it difficult to sleep. Worries and fears may keep you up at night or disturbing dreams may trouble you. Getting quality rest is essential, since lack of sleep places considerable stress on your mind and body, and makes it more difficult to maintain your emotional balance. To improve sleep:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Go to sleep and get up at the same time each day.• Limit drinking, as alcohol disrupts sleep.• Do something relaxing before bed, like listening to soothing music, reading a book, or meditating.• Avoid caffeine in the afternoon or evening.• Get regular exercise—but not too close to bedtime.

When to Seek Help

As mentioned above, a wide range of emotional reactions are common after a natural disaster or traumatic event, including anxiety, numbness, confusion, guilt, and despair. In and of themselves, these emotions aren't cause for undue alarm. Most will start to fade within a relatively short time.

However, if your traumatic stress reaction is so intense and persistent that it's getting in the way of your ability to function, you may need help from a mental health professional.

Traumatic Stress Warning Signs

- It's been 6 weeks, and you're not feeling any better
- You're having trouble functioning at home and work
- You're experiencing terrifying memories, nightmares, or flashbacks
- You're having an increasingly difficult time connecting and relating to others
- You're experiencing suicidal thoughts or feelings
- You're avoiding more and more things that remind you of the disaster or traumatic event

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