

Disaster Relief

Common Responses to Disasters or Traumatic Events



People react in a variety of different ways to disasters. Professionals agree there's no one "healthy" pattern for reacting to a traumatic event. Some people appear to be greatly disturbed, while others throw themselves into recovery efforts or other activities, showing little emotion or concern. Neither type of response is necessarily better than the other—it depends on the individual.

Most people experience some signs or symptoms of trauma-related stress after natural or personal disasters. Whether a person experiences these stress symptoms immediately after the disaster or later on, it is important to recognize them and help people cope with their feelings.

Even when a person's response to a disaster is very dramatic, it's important to remember that he or she is reacting quite normally to very abnormal conditions. One aspect of stress reactions that can be most upsetting to the individual is the belief that no one else is experiencing what he or she is. Many people are amazed to find out that others are thinking and feeling the same way.

Common Immediate Responses to Trauma or Disaster

You may notice some or all of the following behaviors as you meet those who have been affected by a disaster:

- Shock
- Feeling dazed or numb
- Disorientation, confusion
- Disbelief
- Overwhelming sense of helplessness, despair, or hopelessness

- Extreme fear that the disaster will occur again
- Feeling on edge; easily startled; alert to any sign of danger
- Nervousness
- Feeling dizzy
- Restlessness; can't sit still
- Racing heart
- Feeling scattered; difficulty making decisions; difficulty concentrating
- Feeling sad or blue
- Fatigue, loss of appetite, low energy
- Crying spontaneously
- Withdrawing from others; feeling "disconnected" or isolated
- Anger/resentment toward others or no one in particular; feeling irritable
- Feeling guilty about the losses of others or about receiving help from others

Remember, these responses are considered normal. In a sense, they are an instinctive way for the body to protect itself from other trauma. The symptoms may last for days or weeks. But the American Psychological Association has recommended that a person consider seeking help from a professional therapist if the symptoms last for more than a month.

Longer-term Reactions

People typically find that many of their immediate stress reactions decline or disappear after a little time. But some people continue to experience stress-related reactions for months, occasionally even years, after a traumatic event. Here are some common, longer-term reactions:

- Re-experiencing an event through nightmares, flashbacks, or disruptive memories
- Avoiding situations or people that remind a person of the traumatic event
- Being startled easily or dramatically
- Emotional withdrawal or avoiding social situations
- Difficulty sleeping or eating
- Irritability
- Sadness or depression

Many times, these troubling reactions can be triggered by places, people, or objects that remind a person of the traumatic event. Often, specific events or physical sensations cause memories of a disaster or traumatic event. Here are some common triggers of stress-related symptoms:

- Anniversaries of the event
- Sights, sounds, smells, or physical sensations that remind the person of the event
- Returning to the scene of the event
- Weather reports or other warning that indicate a similar event could occur

If You Are Having Difficulties

Remember, you are not alone. Many people are experiencing or have experienced many of the same feelings you are having now. Your feelings are important; having these feelings does not make you silly, weak, or childish. Keep in mind that, as bad as things seem right now, they will get better. These feelings will go away eventually. Don't rush yourself.

Make sure you remain open to talking with others about how you're feeling. It's important. Take comfort that you're also helping someone else when he or she may need it most.

If you believe you are having trouble handling the stress of the current situation, consider talking to someone. You decide when you are ready, but keep in mind that by working through your stress and emotions now, you may lessen your chances of having difficulties later.

Many mental health professionals volunteer their time to talk with victims of disaster or trauma. Your American Red Cross chapter, your local MSU Extension office, mental health professional, or mental health center can connect you with someone who can provide help.

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