

Family tips for recovering from disasters and other tragedies

You may be recovering from a natural disaster or other type of violent or traumatic event. Perhaps you experienced a flood, fire, hurricane, tsunami, earthquake or tornado. People in your family or community may have experienced loss or tragedy. Traumatic experiences such as these tend to be sudden and overwhelming. There may be no signs of physical injury, but strong emotional reactions can take a toll on those impacted. Understanding normal responses to these abnormal events can help you cope with your feelings, thoughts and behaviors, and help you, or those you care about, to regain a sense of control and recovery.

What happens to people after a disaster or traumatic event?

Shock and denial are the initial responses and are normal protective reactions. You may feel stunned, numb or disconnected. You, or someone you know, may minimize the intensity of the event. The following are normal responses to a traumatic event:

- Feelings become intense and sometimes unpredictable. The person may become more irritable, anxious, nervous, depressed or 'moody'.
- The person might have repeated and vivid memories of the event and have physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. It can be difficult to concentrate or make decisions, and they can feel confused. Sleep and eating patterns also may be disrupted.
- Anniversaries of the event, such as at one month or one year, as well as reminders such as the sounds of sirens, or going back to the scene, can trigger upsetting memories of the traumatic experience.
- Interpersonal relationships often become strained. More frequent arguments with family members and coworkers are common. People can become withdrawn and isolated and avoid their usual activities.
- Physical symptoms may accompany the extreme stress. For example, headaches, nausea and chest pain may result and may require medical attention. Pre-existing medical conditions may worsen due to the stress.
- There is not one typical reaction to the stress of traumatic experiences. Some people respond immediately, while others have delayed reactions. Some feel energized with the challenge of coping and can become discouraged or depressed later.

How should I help my family and myself?

- Give yourselves time to heal. Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your lives. Allow time to mourn the losses. Try to be patient with yourself and others.
- Ask for support from people who care about you. Some people find it is helpful to talk, others prefer to write down their feelings
- Find out about local support groups. Talking with and hearing from others in the same circumstances can be reassuring that your reactions are 'normal.'
- Engage in healthy behaviors to cope with stress. Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest and exercise. Avoid alcohol and drugs
- Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following exercise program. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities
- Avoid major life decisions until things are settled down.

How should I help my children?

Be aware that after the traumatic event, children are most afraid that the event will happen again and that there will be a negative impact on their families – that someone will die, leave and/or they'll be left alone.

- Children's reactions are partly based on parents' reactions. If your children are aware that you are upset, admit your concerns but stress your ability to cope and keep them safe.
- A child's reaction also depends on how much he or she sees of the trauma or violent occurrence. Small children should not be exposed to ongoing reports or pictures of the trauma, if possible.
- The child's age affects how the child will respond to the trauma. In young children, distressing dreams of the violent or traumatic event may change into nightmares of monsters, of rescuing others or of threats to others. While six-year-olds may show their fear by refusing to go to school or to do things on their own. Adolescents may minimize their concerns but argue more with parents and show a decline in school performance.

Some things a parent can do:

1. Do not expose your child to the event more than is necessary. Listen to their concerns, and answer their questions honestly. You can acknowledge, within your religious and spiritual beliefs, that no one has all the answers as to why traumatic events happen. Children want to feel that you are in control, and that they are safe.
2. Use age appropriate language and explanations. Children at different ages have very different concepts of loss. Try asking your children what they think – what are their concerns, beliefs and worries.
3. Be available, nurturing, reassuring and predictable. How you react to a traumatic event gives them cues on how to react. (Some information adapted from the APA Practice Directorate Fact Sheet.)