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Traumatic Stress

How to Recover From Disasters and Other Traumatic Events

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The impact of a natural disaster or traumatic event goes far beyond physical damage. The emotional toll can result in a wide range of intense, confusing, and sometimes frightening emotions. Just as it takes time to clear the rubble and repair the damage, it takes time to recover your emotional equilibrium and rebuild your life. There are specific things you can do to help yourself and your loved ones cope with the emotional aftermath of the traumatic event.

The emotional aftermath of traumatic events

Natural disasters, such as fires, earthquakes, or tornadoes and other catastrophic events, such as motor vehicle accidents, plane crashes, nuclear meltdowns, and terrorist attacks, are extraordinarily stressful—both to survivors and observers. Such disasters shatter your sense of security, making you feel helpless and vulnerable in a dangerous world. Whether or not you were directly impacted by the traumatic event, it's normal to feel anxious, scared, and uncertain about what the future may bring.

Usually, these unsettling thoughts and feelings fade as life starts to return to normal. You can assist the process by keeping the following in mind:

People react in different ways to disasters and traumatic events. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to think, feel, or respond. Be tolerant of your own reactions and feelings, as well as the reactions and feelings of others. Don't tell yourself (or anyone else) what you should be thinking, feeling, or doing.

Avoid obsessively thinking about the disastrous event. Repetitious thinking about fearful or painful experiences can overwhelm your nervous system triggering making it harder to think clearly and act appropriately.

Ignoring your feelings will slow the healing process. It may seem better in the moment to avoid experiencing your emotions, but they exist whether you're paying attention to them or not. Even intense feelings will pass if you simply allow yourself to feel what you feel—and you'll feel better afterwards.

Talking about what you feel may be difficult, but it will help you heal. Just as you may find it difficult to face your feelings head on, you may also find it difficult to express those feelings to others. But getting them out is essential. Talking with a calm, caring person is best, but expressing your feelings through journaling, art, and other creative outlets can also help.

How to Help Others

It's human nature to want to help others in times of crisis. However, it's important to know what kind of assistance is needed by those surviving traumatic events. Do not assume someone doesn't want your help if they are not asking for it. It can be difficult for many to seek help and support due to pride, embarrassment, or even shock (i.e. not knowing what or how to ask for help).

Help others to see themselves as "Survivors" not "Victims". People impacted by a disaster need to see themselves as survivors so they can feel a sense of empowerment through their healing process. The disastrous event has happened and now they need help to move forward.

Offer to assist with practical things such as giving them money to shop for new kitchen supplies or clothes. Although second hand items are welcome, it's more empowering for survivors to be able to shop for what they need. In addition, being available to drive them places, if they have lost their vehicle or to take them to do something fun or relaxing (movies or manicures) is suggested.

Common reactions to trauma and disaster

Following a traumatic event, it's normal to feel a wide range of intense emotions and physical reactions. These emotional reactions often come and go in waves. There may be times when you feel jumpy and anxious, and other times when you feel disconnected and numb. Some people experience Grief which is a natural reaction to any significant change or loss.

Normal emotional responses to traumatic events

- **Shock and disbelief** – you may have a hard time accepting the reality of what happened
- **Fear** – that the same thing will happen again, or that you'll lose control or break down
- **Sadness** – particularly if people you know died or you lost a pet
- **Helplessness** – the sudden, unpredictable nature of natural disasters and accidents may leave you feeling vulnerable and helpless
- **Guilt** – that you survived when others died, or that you could have done more to help or prevent the situation
- **Anger** – you may be angry at God or others you feel are responsible
- **Shame** – especially over feelings or fears you can't control
- **Relief** – you may feel relieved that the worst is over, and even hopeful that your life will return to normal

Normal physical stress responses to traumatic events

The symptoms of traumatic stress are not just emotional—they're also physical. It's important to know what the physical symptoms of stress look like, so they don't scare you. They will go away if you don't fight them:

- Trembling or shaking
- Pounding heart
- Rapid breathing
- Stomach tightening or churning
- Feeling dizzy or faint
- Cold sweats

- Lump in throat; feeling choked up
- Racing thoughts

Disaster recovery tip 1: Seek comfort and support

Natural disasters and other traumatic events turn your world upside down and shatter your sense of safety. In the aftermath, taking even small steps towards restoring safety and comfort can make a big difference.

Being proactive about your own and your family's situation and well-being (rather than passively waiting for someone else to help you) will help you feel less powerless and vulnerable. Focus on anything that helps you feel more calm, centered, and in control.

Reestablish a routine

There is comfort in the familiar. After a disaster, getting back—as much as possible—to your normal routine, will help you minimize traumatic stress, anxiety, and hopelessness. Even if your work or school routine is disrupted, you can structure your day with regular times for eating, sleeping, spending time with family, and relaxing.

Do things that keep your mind occupied (read, watch a movie, cook, play with your kids), so you're not dedicating all your energy and attention to the traumatic event.

Connect with others

You may be tempted to withdraw from social activities and avoid others after experiencing a traumatic event or natural disaster. But it's important to stay connected to life and the people who care about you. Support from other people is vital to recovery from traumatic stress, so lean on your close friends and family members during this tough time.

- 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.

Challenge your sense of helplessness

Trauma leaves you feeling powerless and vulnerable. It's important to remind yourself that you have strengths and coping skills that can get you through tough times.

One of the best ways to [reclaim your sense of power is by helping others](#). Taking positive action directly challenges the sense of helplessness that contributes to trauma:

- comfort someone else
- give blood

- volunteer your time
- donate to your favorite charity

Disaster recovery tip 2: Minimize media exposure

In the wake of a traumatic event or disaster, it's important to protect yourself and your loved ones from unnecessary exposure to additional trauma and reminders of the traumatic event.

While some people 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, retraumatization is common.

- 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 your children from seeing or hearing unnecessary reminders of the disaster or traumatic event
- After viewing disaster coverage, talk with your loved ones about the footage and what you're feeling

Disaster recovery tip 3: Acknowledge and accept your feelings

After a traumatic event, you may experience all kinds of difficult and surprising emotions, such as shock, anger, and guilt. Sometimes it may seem like the sadness and anxiety will never let up.

Sadness, grief, anger and fear are normal reactions to the loss of safety and security (as well as life, limb, and property) that comes in the wake of a disaster. Accepting these feelings as part of the [grieving process](#), and allowing yourself to feel what you feel, is necessary for healing.

Dealing with traumatic grief and other painful emotions

- Give yourself time to heal and to mourn the losses you've experienced.
- Don't try to force the healing process.
- Be patient with the pace of recovery.
- Be prepared for difficult and volatile emotions.
- Allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling without judgment or guilt.
- Talk to someone you trust about what you're feeling.

An exercise to help you feel grounded in times of emotional stress and turmoil

Sit on a chair, feel your feet on the ground, press on your thighs, feel your behind on the seat, and your back supported by the chair; look around you and pick six objects that have red or blue. This should allow you to feel in the present, more grounded and in your body. Notice how your breath gets deeper and calmer. You may want to go outdoors and find a peaceful place to sit on the grass. As you do, feel how your bottom can be held and supported by the ground.

Source: *Emotional First Aid*, Gina Ross, MFCC, and Peter Levine, Ph.D.

Disaster recovery tip 4: Make stress reduction a priority

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.

Relaxation is a necessity, not a luxury

Traumatic stress takes a heavy toll on your mental and physical health. Making time for rest and relaxation will help you bring your brain and body back into balance.

- Do relaxing activities such as [meditating](#), listening to soothing music, walking in a beautiful place, or visualizing a favorite spot.
- Schedule time for activities that bring you joy—a favorite hobby or pastime, a chat with a cherished friend.
- Use your downtime to relax. Savor a good meal, read a bestseller, take a bath, or enjoy an uplifting or funny movie.

How sleep can reduce traumatic stress

After experiencing a traumatic 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 after a disaster is essential, since lack of sleep places considerable stress on your mind and body, and makes it more difficult to maintain your emotional balance.

As you work through the trauma-related stress, your sleep problems should disappear. But in the meantime, you can [improve your sleep](#) with the following strategies:

- 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.
- Avoid media usage before bed (no T.V., internet, emails, or video games)
- Get regular exercise—but not too close to bedtime.

When to seek help for traumatic stress

As mentioned above, a wide range of emotional reactions are common after a 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—preferably a trauma specialist.

Acute Traumatic stress warning signs

- It's been 6 weeks, and you're not feeling any better
- You've 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

Helping children cope with traumatic stress

After a disaster or traumatic event, children need extra reassurance and support. Do your best to create an environment where your kids feel safe to communicate what they're feeling and to ask questions.

While you should tailor the information you share according to the child's age, it's important to be honest. Don't say nothing's wrong if something *is* wrong, and don't make promises you can't keep.

Children's reactions to traumatic events can look different than adults. For instance they may have regressive behaviors such as bedwetting. They may also display anxious symptoms such as: increased worrisome thoughts that may seem unrealistic to adults, clingy behavior (especially towards primary caregiver), excessive crying, whining, agitation, and compulsive behaviors such as repetitive organizing or cleaning.

Tips for helping children heal after a disaster

- Provide your kids with ongoing opportunities to talk about what they went through or what they're seeing on TV. Encourage them to ask questions and express their concerns. Make it clear that there are no bad feelings.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, don't be afraid to admit it. Don't jeopardize your child's trust in you by making something up.
- The traumatic event or disaster may trigger or bring up unrelated fears and issues in your kids. Acknowledge and validate these concerns, even if they don't seem relevant to you.
- Monitor television watching. Limit your child's exposure to graphic images and videos. As much as you can, watch news reports of the disaster with your children. This will give you a good opportunity to talk and answer questions.
- Remember that children often personalize situations. They may worry about their own safety or that of their family, even if the traumatic event occurred far away. Reassure your child and help him or her place the situation in context.
- Watch for physical signs of stress. The symptoms of traumatic stress may appear as physical complaints such as headaches, stomach pains, changes in appetite or sleep disturbances.