

Tips for Survivors of a Traumatic Event

What to Expect in Your Personal, Family, Work, and Financial Life



The effect of a disaster or traumatic event goes far beyond its immediate devastation. Just as it takes time to reconstruct damaged buildings, it takes time to grieve and rebuild our lives. Life may not return to normal for months, or even years, following a disaster or traumatic event. There may be changes in living conditions that cause changes in day-to-day activities, leading to strains in relationships, changes in expectations, and shifts in responsibilities. These disruptions in relationships, roles, and routines can make life unfamiliar or unpredictable.

Things to Remember When Trying to Understand Disaster Events

- No one who experiences a disaster is untouched by it.
 - It is normal to feel anxious about you and your family's safety.
 - Profound sadness, grief, and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
 - Acknowledging our feelings helps us recover.
 - Focusing on your strengths and abilities will help you to heal.
 - Accepting help from community programs and resources is healthy.
 - We each have different needs and different ways of coping.
 - It is common to want to strike back at people who have caused great pain. However, nothing good is accomplished by hateful language or actions.
- Depression, sadness, and feelings of hopelessness.
 - Mood swings and crying easily.
 - Difficulty maintaining balance.
 - Headaches/stomach problems.
 - Tunnel vision/muffled hearing.
 - Colds or flu-like symptoms.
 - Difficulty sleeping.
 - Poor work performance.
 - Reluctance to leave home.
 - Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone.
 - Increased use of drugs/alcohol.

Ways to Ease the Stress

- Talk with someone about your feelings (anger, sorrow, and other emotions) even though it may be difficult.
- Don't hold yourself responsible for the disastrous event or be frustrated because you feel that you cannot help directly in the rescue work.
- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing by staying active in your daily life patterns or by adjusting them. A healthy approach to life (e.g., healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation, meditation) will help both you and your family.

Signs that Stress Management Assistance Is Needed

- Disorientation or confusion and difficulty communicating thoughts.
- Limited attention span and difficulty concentrating
- Becoming easily frustrated.
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt.



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- Maintain a normal household and daily routine, limiting demanding responsibilities of yourself and your family.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Participate in memorials, rituals, and the use of symbols as a way to express feelings.
- Use existing supports groups of family, friends, and spiritual/religious outlets.
- Establish a family emergency plan. It can be comforting to know that there is something you can do.

A disaster or traumatic event can have far-reaching effects in several major areas of our lives, making rebuilding our emotional lives extremely difficult. However, sometimes just knowing what to expect can help ease the transition back to a normal life. As you and your family begin to rebuild your lives, you may face any or all of the situations described below.

Personal Uncertainties

- Feeling mentally drained and physically exhausted is normal and common.
- The loss of a home, business, or income may result in displacement and confusion about the future.
- Unresolved emotional issues or pre-existing problems and previous losses may resurface.
- Anniversaries of the disaster or traumatic event remind us of our losses. This reaction may be triggered by the event date each month and may be especially strong on the yearly anniversary of the event.

Family Relationship Changes

- Relationships may become stressed when everyone's emotions are heightened, and conflicts with spouses and other family members may increase.
- When homes are destroyed or damaged, families may have to live in temporary housing or with relatives and friends, leading to overcrowding and added tension.
- Family members or friends may be forced to move out of the area, disrupting relationships and usual support systems.
- Parents may be physically or emotionally unavailable to their children following a disaster or traumatic event, because they are busy cleaning up or are preoccupied, distracted, or distressed by difficulties related to the event.
- Parents may become overprotective of their children and their children's safety.
- Children may be expected to take on more adult roles, such as watching siblings or helping with cleanup efforts, leaving less time to spend with friends or participate in routine activities, such as summer camp or field trips.

Work Disruptions

- Fatigue and increased stress from preoccupation with personal issues can lead to poor work performance.
- Conflicts with co-workers may increase, because of the added stress.
- Businesses may be forced to lay off employees, or company work hours and wages may be cut.

Additional Resources

Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA)

8730 Georgia Avenue, Suite 600
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Phone: 240-485-1001
Fax: 240-485-1035
Web site: www.adaa.org

National Mental Health Association

2001 N. Beauregard Street, 12th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22311
Local phone: 703-684-7742
Toll-free: 800-969-NMHA (6642)
Fax: 703-684-5968
Web site: www.nmha.org/reassurance/anniversary/index.cfm

Department of Veterans Affairs

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
116D VA Medical and Regional Office Center
White River Junction, VT 05009
Phone: 802-296-6300
Web site: www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/disasters/fs_rescue_workers.html

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

500 C Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20472
Toll-free: 800-621-FEMA
Web site: www.fema.gov/index2.htm

National Institute of Mental Health

Office of Communications
6001 Executive Boulevard
Room 8184, MSC 9663
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663
Local phone: 301-443-4513
Toll-free: 866-615-NIMH (6464)
TTY: 301-443-8431
Fax: 301-443-4279
Web site: www.nimh.nih.gov

Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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- Reduced income may require taking a second job.
- Daily travel and commute patterns may be disrupted, because of the loss of a car or road reconstruction.

Financial Worries

- Those who experience work disruptions may be unable to regain their previous standard of living, leading to financial concerns and unpaid bills.
- Seeking financial assistance to rebuild and repair damages adds to the already high levels of stress caused by the disaster or traumatic event, and the hassles of dealing with a bureaucracy can add to the frustration.

How to Be a Survivor

Regardless of individual circumstances, everyone needs to complete several steps to recovery from a disaster or traumatic event.

- Accept the reality of the loss.
- Allow yourself and other family members to feel sadness and grief over what has happened.
- Adjust to a new environment. Acknowledge that the person or possessions lost are gone forever.
- Put closure to the situation and move on. Do not continue to let the loss take its physical, emotional, or spiritual toll.
- Have faith in better times to come.

You and your family have survived a traumatic event. That doesn't mean your lives are over or that you don't deserve to be happy again. Return to doing things you enjoy with friends and as a family. Reestablish the routines of your life. Make commitments and keep them.

If you or a member of your family still has trouble coping, ask for help. Consult a counselor or mental health professional. In the workplace, you may be able to get assistance from your human resources department or your company's Employee Assistance Program. For help with financial matters, contact a financial advisor.