Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SAMHSA
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Tips for Survivors of a Disaster or Traumatic Event:

WHAT TO EXPECT IN YOUR PERSONAL, FAMILY, WORK, AND FINANCIAL LIFE

About Disasters and Traumatic Events

Disasters and traumatic events touch all of our lives. About two thirds of the U.S. population have reported experiencing at least one personal traumatic event before the age of 18.[1] Many people experience trauma due to natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, and other storms and human-caused events like mass violence and terrorism. For some survivors, disasters can remind them of earlier trauma and make it harder to recover. But with good social support and coping skills, most survivors have the ability to recover and are quite resilient. For those who continue to suffer, help is available.

After a Disaster or Traumatic Event

What follows are examples of the types of emotional, behavioral, physical, and cognitive responses that are all common reactions to a disaster or other traumatic event.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN YOUR PERSONAL LIFE

Anxiety, sadness, and trouble sleeping are the most common responses to traumatic events. So are headaches and stomach aches, overeating, and loss of appetite. Grief may be felt intensely on and off for at least a year if someone has lost a loved one in the event.

Anger is a common response experienced more by men, while self-blame appears more often in women. Some people will look at what their lives were like prior to a trauma and make comparisons. Others may be concerned about their own and their family's safety. Additionally, everyone has different ways of coping, which can make people act differently than they usually do.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN YOUR FAMILY LIFE

The effect of a disaster or traumatic event goes far beyond its immediate devastation. It takes time for survivors to grieve and rebuild individual and family lives. Everyday routines may not return to normal for months, or even years, especially following a large-scale disaster or traumatic event. Alternate living conditions (e.g., temporary housing) can disrupt day-to-day activities and create shifts in roles and responsibilities, leading to strains in relationships. These disruptions in routine can make life unfamiliar or unpredictable and change everyone's expectations. Remember, also, that children's stress may be a reflection of how their parents are handling the stress.

[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2012). The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/ace/findings.htm.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN YOUR WORK AND FINANCIAL LIFE

Workplace routines may change, or businesses may close altogether, if there is extensive physical damage to buildings and roads. Daily travel and commuting patterns may be disrupted because of the loss of a car or road reconstruction. The stress of a traumatic event may lead to poor work performance, and short tempers may surface at the workplace. Those who experience work disruptions may be unable to regain their previous standard of living, and reduced income may lead to unpaid bills. Seeking financial assistance to rebuild and repair damages can add to the already high levels of stress and frustration caused by the disaster or traumatic event.

WHAT HELPS

Everyone has different ways of coping, but there are some steps to recovery from a disaster or traumatic event that are known to help many people. Start by realizing that you survived the disaster or trauma and that life doesn't have to stop.

- **Talk with someone.** Connecting with and talking to others who accept and understand your feelings is the best way to help yourself. Reach out to a trusted friend, family member, or faith leader and talk about how you are doing.
- **Move your body.** It is the next best way to relieve stress. Try deep breathing, gentle stretching, and walking. These are the simplest exercises that can help. Other types of exercise can also relieve stress (use caution when lifting heavy weights, as excess adrenaline from stress can cause muscle damage).
- **Meditate and listen to music** timed to your breathing. These are effective ways to calm yourself.
- **Promote physical care** by eating healthy meals and snacks, getting enough rest, and drinking plenty of water. Model these behaviors for your family.
- **Reestablish routines.** Get back to doing the things you would normally do every day. This can help you regain a sense of control over your life and reduce anxiety.
- **Know that it's okay to celebrate successes** in the recovery process and have moments of joy even after a trauma. Return to doing things you enjoy as a family and spending time with friends.
- **Try not to let thoughts about the disaster or trauma take over your thinking.** If you are having difficulty making sense of the trauma or are questioning why this event happened, seek out a mental health professional or, if you prefer, speak with a trusted faith-based or spiritual leader.

- **Speak with a financial advisor.** For help with financial matters, talking with a professional financial advisor may ease your stress and the feeling that you have to manage it alone. An advisor may have useful suggestions for addressing financial concerns, and may be able to help directly or to connect you with resources to help in other ways.

Signs That Survivors Need More Help Managing Stress

Sometimes excessive ongoing stress or medical problems that existed before the disaster or trauma can make recovery difficult. Some of the more serious signs of stress include the following:

- Disorientation or confusion and difficulty communicating thoughts
- Inability to see or hear properly
- Limited attention span and difficulty concentrating
- Feelings of becoming easily frustrated
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Frequent mood swings or continuous crying
- Colds or flu-like symptoms
- Reluctance to leave home
- Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone
- Increased use of illegal drugs, alcohol, or prescription medication.
- Worsening of existing medical problems.

If you or a member of your family experience trouble coping, or these signs continue for more than 2 to 4 weeks, ask for help. Consult a counselor or mental health professional, or see the **Helpful Resources** on the next page. In the workplace, you may be able to get assistance from your human resources department or your company's Employee Assistance Program.

Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)
Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515
Website: http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
Website: http://www.samhsa.gov/traumaJustice
This behavioral health resource can be accessed by visiting the SAMHSA website and then selecting the related link.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)*
Toll-Free: 1-800-621-FEMA (1-800-621-3362)
Website: http://www.fema.gov

Department of Veterans Affairs*
National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
PTSD Information Voicemail: 1-802-296-6300
Website: http://www.ptsd.va.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.*

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Treatment Facility Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and español)
TDD: 1-866-889-2647
Website: http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/MHTreatmentLocator

MentalHealth.gov
Website: http://www.mentalhealth.gov
MentalHealth.gov provides U.S. government information and resources on mental health.

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357)
(24/7 English and español); TDD: 1-800-487-4889
Website: http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)
Website: http://www.samhsa.gov
This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.

Workplace Helpline
Toll-Free: 1-800-WORKPLACE (1-800-967-5752)
Website: http://workplace.samhsa.gov

Disaster Distress Helpline

PHONE: 1-800-985-5990 TEXT: "TalkWithUs" to 66746
WEB: http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov

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