

# Disaster Relief

## *Managing a Traumatic Event*



Disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, or floods are unexpected, sudden, and overwhelming. It is common for people who have experienced a disaster to have strong emotional reactions.

These events affect not only the survivors, but the rescue workers, friends, and relatives of the people involved. Trauma can also affect people who have seen the event in person or viewed it on television.

It is important to learn what responses to a disaster are normal. This helps you cope effectively with your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It may also help you along the path to recovery.

### Common Responses

Shock and denial shortly after the event are normal reactions. Once you have moved past the initial shock, responses to traumatic events vary. Common responses include:

- **Intense or unpredictable feelings**, such as distress; despair; fear; helplessness; grief; depression; anger; irritability; anxiety; nervousness; and sudden, dramatic mood changes.
- **Changes to thoughts and behaviors** including: flashbacks; problems concentrating or making decisions; or disruptions in sleeping and eating patterns (some people may eat or sleep too much, while others may lose their appetite and have trouble sleeping).
- **Strained relationships** (frequent arguments or conflict) with family, friends, or coworkers; becoming withdrawn, isolated, or disengaged from your usual social activities.

- **Physical symptoms of stress**, such as headaches and nausea; preexisting medical conditions could be affected by disaster-related stress.

Responses to trauma can last for weeks or even months. Most people report feeling better within 3 months after the event.

### How to Help Yourself

While it's common to experience stress in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, most people are able to bounce back from the trauma. Recovery, not prolonged distress, is normal. There are many things you can do to cope with a traumatic event.

1. Understand that your feelings and symptoms are normal, especially right after the event.
2. Maintain a daily routine.
3. Share your feelings with family or close friends.
4. Keep track of your thoughts and feelings in a journal.
5. Seek out hobbies and other interests.
6. Spend time with others, even if you don't feel like it.
7. Give yourself time to adjust.
8. Recognize you can't control everything.
9. Eat healthy foods, exercise, and get enough sleep.
10. Don't use alcohol or drugs to cope.
11. Find a support group led by a trained facilitator.
12. Avoid making major life decisions.

## How to Help Your Child

Disasters are often frightening and confusing for children. Some children return to behaviors such as thumb-sucking or bed-wetting. Children may also be prone to nightmares and be afraid to sleep alone. It is important for parents, caregivers, and other adults to help children cope with trauma by listening and responding in an open and supportive way. Some things you can do to help children cope include:

1. **Keep regular schedules** (such as eating, playing, and going to bed) to help restore a sense of security and normalcy.
2. **Allow your child to be more dependent on you** (for instance, allow your child to be more clingy than usual).
3. **Help children find ways to express themselves;** not all children will be able to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and fears, but they may be able to draw pictures or play with toys.
4. **Recognize and affirm your child's thoughts, feelings, and reactions.** Explain that it is OK to feel upset when bad or scary things happen.
5. **Help your child label his or her feelings.** Offer some words your child can use.
6. **Reassure your child but don't make unrealistic promises.**
7. **Use words and ideas children can understand.** Answer questions and explain things in a way that is appropriate for your child's age.

8. **Monitor children's viewing of news coverage.** The repetition of frightening images from a disaster may re-traumatize children.
9. **Be a good role model for your child.** Children take cues for how to act from adults. They are watching how you respond to the tragedy.

## When to Contact a Doctor or Mental-Health Professional

Mental-health providers can help both children and their parents understand how to cope with the impact of a traumatic event, such as a natural disaster.

You should seek professional help if symptoms get worse; persist; or interfere with day-to-day activities, school or work performance, or relationships with family and friends.

Signs that a child may need professional help to cope with a traumatic event include:

- aggressive emotional outbursts
- continued and extreme withdrawal
- obsession with the traumatic event
- serious problems at school
- other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties

Never be ashamed to seek professional help from a licensed counselor, therapist, or psychologist. These professionals are trained to help you develop skills so that you are able to better manage trauma.

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