

Coping With Disaster

<https://www.mhanational.org/coping-disaster>

If your community has been hit by a natural disaster, you're probably trying to make sense of what happened and deal with the stress of the situation. These events create a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety for those directly and indirectly affected. In the days and weeks following the disaster, you may begin to have some of these common reactions:

Common Reactions

- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation; difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Apathy and emotional numbing
- Nightmares and reoccurring thoughts about the event
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness and depression
- Feeling powerless
- Changes in eating patterns; loss of appetite or overeating
- Crying for "no apparent reason"
- Headaches, back pains and stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping or falling asleep
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs

Tips For Coping

It is 'normal' to have difficulty managing your feelings after major traumatic events. However, if you don't deal with the stress, it can be harmful to your mental and physical health. Here are some tips for coping in these difficult times:

- Talk about it. By talking with others about the event, you can relieve stress and realize that others share your feelings.
- Spend time with friends and family. They can help you through this tough time. If your family lives outside the area, stay in touch by phone. If you have any children, encourage them to share their concerns and feelings about the disaster with you.
- Take care of yourself. Get plenty of rest and exercise, and eat properly. If you smoke or drink coffee, try to limit your intake, since nicotine and caffeine can also add to your stress.

- Limit exposure to images of the disaster. Watching or reading news about the event over and over again will only increase your stress.
- Find time for activities you enjoy. Read a book, go for a walk, catch a movie or do something else you find enjoyable. These healthy activities can help you get your mind off the disaster and keep the stress in check.
- Take one thing at a time. For people under stress, an ordinary workload can sometimes seem unbearable. Pick one urgent task and work on it. Once you accomplish that task, choose the next one. “Checking off” tasks will give you a sense of accomplishment and make things feel less overwhelming.
- Do something positive. Give blood, prepare “care packages” for people who have lost relatives or their homes or jobs, or volunteer in a rebuilding effort. Helping other people can give you a sense of purpose in a situation that feels ‘out of your control.’
- Avoid drugs and excessive drinking. Drugs and alcohol may temporarily seem to remove stress, but in the long run they generally create additional problems that compound the stress you were already feeling.
- Ask for help when you need it. If you have strong feelings that won’t go away or if you are troubled for longer than four to six weeks, you may want to seek professional help. People who have existing mental health problems and those who have survived past trauma may also want to check in with a mental health care professional. Being unable to manage your responses to the disaster and resume your regular activities may be symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a real and treatable illness. Help is available. Make an appointment with a mental health professional to discuss how well you are coping with the recent events. You could also join a support group. Don’t try to cope alone. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness.

Additional Resources

The Disaster Distress Helpline (DDH) is a national hotline dedicated to providing year-round disaster crisis counseling. This toll-free, multilingual, crisis support service is available 24/7 via telephone (1-800-985-5990) and SMS (text ‘TalkWithUs’ to 66746) to residents in the U.S. and its territories who are experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. Callers and texters are connected to trained and caring professionals from a network of crisis centers across the country. Helpline staff provide supportive counseling, including information on common stress reactions and healthy coping, as well as referrals to local disaster-related resources for follow-up care and support.

Visit <http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov> for additional information and resources related to disaster behavioral health.