

Managing Traumatic Stress

Tips for Recovering from Disasters and Other Traumatic Events

Shooting rampages on college campuses, along with other types of disasters, are often unexpected, sudden, and overwhelming. In some cases, there are no outwardly visible signs of physical injury, but there is nonetheless a serious emotional toll. It is common for people who have experienced traumatic situations to have very strong emotional reactions. Understanding normal responses to these abnormal events can aid you in coping effectively with your feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and help you along the path to recovery.

What happens to people after a disaster or other traumatic event?

Shock and denial are typical responses to traumatic events and disasters, especially shortly after the event. Both shock and denial are normal protective reactions.

Shock is a sudden and often intense disturbance of your emotional state that may leave you feeling stunned or dazed. Denial involves your not acknowledging that something very stressful has happened, or not experiencing fully the intensity of the event. You may temporarily feel numb or disconnected from life.

As the initial shock subsides, reactions vary from one person to another. The following, however, are normal responses to a traumatic event:

- Feelings become intense and sometimes are unpredictable. You may become more irritable than usual, and your mood may change back and forth dramatically. You might be especially anxious or nervous, or even become depressed.
- Thoughts and behavior patterns are affected by the trauma. You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event. These flashbacks may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused. Sleep and eating patterns also may be disrupted.
- Recurring emotional reactions are common. Anniversaries of the event, such as at one month or one year, can trigger upsetting memories of the traumatic experience. These 'triggers' may be accompanied by fears that the stressful event will be repeated.
- Interpersonal relationships often become strained. Greater conflict, such as more frequent arguments with family members and coworkers, is common. On the other hand, you might become withdrawn and isolated and avoid your usual activities.
- Physical symptoms may accompany the extreme stress. For example, headaches, nausea and chest pain may result and may require medical attention. Pre-existing medical conditions may worsen due to the stress.

How do people respond differently over time?

It is important for you to realize that there is not one 'standard' pattern of reaction to the extreme stress of traumatic experiences. Some people respond immediately, while others have delayed reactions—sometimes months or even years later. Some have adverse effects for a long period of time, while others recover rather quickly.

And reactions can change over time. Some who have suffered from trauma are energized initially by the event to help them with the challenge of coping, only to later become discouraged or depressed.

A number of factors tend to affect the length of time required for recovery, including:

- **The degree of intensity and loss.** Events that last longer and pose a greater threat, and where loss of life or substantial loss of property is involved, often take longer to resolve.
- **A person's general ability to cope with emotionally challenging situations.** Individuals who have handled other difficult, stressful circumstances well may find it easier to cope with the trauma.
- **Other stressful events preceding the traumatic experience.** Individuals faced with other emotionally challenging situations, such as serious health problems or family-related difficulties, may have more intense reactions to the new stressful event and need more time to recover.

How should I help myself and my family?

There are a number of steps you can take to help restore emotional well being and a sense of control following a disaster or other traumatic experience, including the following:

- Give yourself time to heal. Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathize with your situation. But keep in mind that your typical support system may be weakened if those who are close to you also have experienced or witnessed the trauma.
- Communicate your experience in whatever ways feel comfortable to you—such as by talking with family or close friends, or keeping a diary.
- Find out about local support groups that often are available such as for those who have suffered from natural disasters, or for women who are victims of rape. These can be especially helpful for people with limited personal support systems.
- Try to find groups led by appropriately trained and experienced professionals. Group discussion can help people realize that other individuals in the same circumstances often have similar reactions and emotions.
- Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.
- Avoid major life decisions such as switching careers or jobs if possible because these activities tend to be highly stressful.

When should I seek professional help?

Some people are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by traumatic events by using their own support systems. It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems persist and

continue to interfere with daily living. For example, some may feel overwhelming nervousness or lingering sadness that adversely affects job performance and interpersonal relationships.

Individuals with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional. Psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers help educate people about normal responses to extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact.

With children, continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the traumatic event, continued and extreme withdrawal, and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional can help such children and their parents understand and deal with thoughts, feelings and behaviors that result from trauma.

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