

Common Reactions to Disasters

QUICK GUIDE

COMMON REACTIONS TO DISASTERS

Stress Symptoms

Many people will experience symptoms of psychological distress after disasters which have an adverse effect on our lives. This is part of a normal and healthy stress response to traumatic events.

Symptoms you might experience

- Re-experiencing (flashbacks), bad dreams and frightening thoughts.
- Wanting to avoid any reminders (e.g. the room where the disaster was experienced – this may be a particular issue with children).
- Feelings such as feeling numb, detached or a bit unreal, losing interest in activities, and feeling worried and guilty.
- Being easily startled, feeling on edge or irritable.
- Having problems sleeping.
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches or upset, sore muscles and poor appetite.
- Feeling constantly tired.
- Worrying about things that could have or might happen.
- Reacting in ways that feel 'out of character' for you.

These symptoms are normal – they are your body preparing to respond to danger. Many of the physical symptoms are your body's reaction to the extra adrenalin circulating.

Is this Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

No – these are normal healthy responses by your mind and body to stress.

What should I do?

- There is no 'right way' to deal with these symptoms – everyone is different. What is important is to work through your experience of the disaster at your own pace. For many people it will be enough just to discuss and make sense of the event with friends, neighbours, and family. For others, keeping busy doing other activities may be more useful than discussion. It is best not to push people to discuss what happened if they do not want to. If someone does want to talk it through then let them do this.
- 'Debriefing' (i.e. making people go over the events again in graphic detail) was once a popular technique but is not used now as it can do more harm than good.
- It is important to keep to normal daily routines – business as usual as much as possible.
- It is important to eat and sleep at the usual times even if you don't feel hungry.
- It may be helpful for people not to be on their own during this time if at all possible – some people may choose to go out of town for a couple of days to stay with friends and relatives and get a good night's rest.
- Seek support from friends, family and local community – discussing the distress with others who shared the event and who you know seems more helpful than discussing with strangers.
- Accept the concern and care of others.
- Think about and focus on positive aspects of your behaviour during and since the disaster – people will often feel guilty that they didn't react as well as they would have liked to.

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- Relaxation and anger control skills may be useful – the CALM website from the University of Auckland has some helpful material on self help strategies for patients: www.calm.auckland.ac.nz
- Regular exercise is helpful in relieving physical as well as mental symptoms – a brisk 15 - 20 minute walk 3 to 4 times a week is enough.
- Actively make time and plan for relaxing and things that you usually enjoy – do something nice for yourself.
- Do not use alcohol excessively as this will increase anxiety and sleep disruption.

Will these symptoms go away?

- Yes - these feelings will generally decrease over the next few days and weeks as some sense of normal life returns and most people will not have on-going symptoms
- If you have more severe symptoms that are not decreasing using these measures, talk to your doctor and practice nurse. There is specialised and effective help available for people who are suffering from more severe or longer term symptoms.

Will medication help?

Generally medication is not helpful and may do more harm than good in this initial period. Your doctor may prescribe a sedative for a short period only if your sleep patterns have been particularly disrupted.

Ref: Information gathered from Pegasus Health and Canterbury District Health Board 2010.



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