

Managing Traumatic Stress: Tips for Recovering From Disasters and Other Traumatic Events

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 strong emotional reactions.

In a disaster, children will look to you and other adults for help and guidance. How you respond in an emergency situation will give them clues on how to act.

Understanding normal responses to these abnormal events can aid you in coping effectively with your feelings, thoughts, and behaviours, 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 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. It is important to remember, the younger the child, the more their behaviour is a communication about how they feel.

The following are normal responses to a traumatic event:

- Feelings become intense and sometimes unpredictable. You may become more irritable than usual, and your mood may change back and forth dramatically. You might be anxious or nervous.
- Thoughts and behaviour 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 heart beat or sweating. You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused. Sleep and eating patterns may also be disrupted.
- Interpersonal relationships may become strained. You may find that you have less motivation to participate in usual activities.

- Physical symptoms may accompany the reaction to the trauma. For example, headaches and nausea.

Children and their Response to Disaster

Children depend on daily routines: they wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, play with friends. When emergencies and disasters interrupt this routine, children may become anxious and changes in their behaviour may become evident.

Possible Reactions for Lower Primary School	Possible Reactions for Pre-adolescent & Adolescent Years
<p>Behavioural</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unwillingness to be left alone ▪ Confusion ▪ Tearfulness ▪ Aggression ▪ Fearfulness ▪ Anxiety ▪ Difficulty coping with change ▪ Overactive behaviour ▪ Restlessness ▪ Irritability ▪ Excessive concern for others <p>Physical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Change in eating habits ▪ Sleep disturbances ▪ Headaches ▪ Bowel and bladder problems ▪ Lack of coordination ▪ Small ailments requiring comfort <p>Impact on Thinking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Preoccupation with trauma ▪ Reduced attention span ▪ Reduced ability to play constructively ▪ Memory problems ▪ Confusion ▪ Replaying or seeing the event over and over 	<p>Behavioural</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Decreased school performance ▪ Loss of interest in usual activities ▪ Need to repeatedly go over the event ▪ Detachment, shame and guilt ▪ Self conscious about emotional responses (fear and vulnerability) ▪ Strong identification with peers ▪ Mood swings ▪ Need to conform with peers in response to event ▪ Lack of cooperation at school and at home <p>Physical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Headaches ▪ Aches and pains ▪ Lack or loss of appetite ▪ Tiredness ▪ Disturbed sleep <p>Impact on Thinking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recall of vivid disturbing images ▪ Trouble thinking clearly ▪ Poor concentration ▪ Inability to stop thinking about the issues all the time

Be aware that after a disaster, children are most afraid that:

- the event will happen again
- someone will be injured or killed
- they will be separated from the family

- they will be left alone.

There are three things that will provide positive support for children:

- restoring their comfort level and a sense of safety
- providing age appropriate and factual responses to questions they have about the incident
- informing children about what is happening to them and to adults.

How do people respond differently over time?

It is important for you to realise that there is not one 'standard' pattern of reaction to the traumatic experience. Some people respond immediately, while others have delayed reactions - sometimes weeks, months or even years later. Some experience effects over a long period of time, while others recover rather quickly.

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 wellbeing and a sense of control following a disaster or other traumatic experience, including the following:

- Recognise that this is a challenging time but one that you can work through to manage by calling upon skills that have helped you in the past.
- 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 empathise with your situation. 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 talking with family or close friends, or keeping a diary.
- Seek the support of local groups that are available for those who have suffered from natural disasters. These can be helpful for people with limited personal support systems.

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.

Individuals with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a trained and experienced health professional. Psychologists and other mental health providers work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact.

Further Support

If you wish to talk to someone, please contact your school in the first instance. For further assistance or help, contact Student Wellbeing at your Catholic Education Office:

Melbourne - 03 9267 0228

Ballarat - 03 5337 7135

Sale – 03 5622 6600

Sandhurst – 03 5443 2377 or 03 5445 9919

Reflection

When sorrow comes, let us accept it simply

As a part of life.

Let the heart be open to pain; let it be stretched by it.

In the desolate hour, there is an outcry;

A clenching of the hands upon emptiness;

A burning pain of bereavement;

A weary ache of loss.

But anguish, like ecstasy, is not forever.

There comes a gentleness, a returning quietness,

A restoring stillness.

This, too, is a door to life.

Here is a deepening of meaning,

An opportunity to reflect and meditate on the importance of loving relationships.

And through the process of going forward

An awakening of a deeper inward knowledge

In the hope that all will be well.

Lord, please comfort those affected by this disaster. May their communities come together in love, prayer and to help them care for each other.