

When Disaster or a Traumatic Event Strikes: Easing Anxiety

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During a disaster or traumatic event, most people initially feel dazed or numb. Some events are so sudden, unpredictable or devastating that denial kicks in immediately: “This can’t really be happening.” Feelings of fear, helplessness, hopelessness and sadness are also common. And sometimes, some people are happy just to be alive, or are grateful that the tragedy wasn’t worse.

Lack of control produces anxiety

If we actually knew when a hurricane, terrorist act or tornado would strike, or where oil would wash ashore, we could prepare ourselves and lessen the impact that these disasters have on our lives. Because we don’t know these things ahead of time, when the event happens our world is shaken to its core.

We realize that we are not in control, which produces anxiety. When fear and anxiety dominate our emotions and the emotions of those around us, it is hard to regain balance and perspective. But it is necessary if we are to get on with our lives.

Give yourself time to feel better

People respond differently when faced with a disaster. Some initially turn their anxiety outward and launch into action by helping others and staying busy. They may fall to pieces after the initial crisis has subsided. Others remain in a state of shock and confusion, experiencing the entire gamut of emotions. You may have strong feelings right away, or you may not notice a change until much later, after the crisis is over. Prolonged worry can change how you interact with your friends and family. It may take time for you to feel better and for your life to return to normal. Give yourself time to adjust.

Things you can do

There is no simple or straightforward way to fix things or to make things better right away. Disasters are like that. But there are things you can do to help yourself, your family and your community.

- **Recognize that some things**—perhaps many things—are beyond your control. Acceptance of reality is a big hurdle in coming to grips with a tragic event.
- **Get back to a normal routine as soon as possible and as much as possible.** This is

especially important for children.

- **Take care of your health.** Stress can wreak havoc on emotions and on physical well-being by suppressing the immune system, raising blood pressure and facilitating a host of other physiologic processes.
- **Eat well and get as much rest as you can** during and after the disaster.
- **Take time to talk with loved ones, friends, co-workers or clergy.** Talk about your feelings with them.
- **Don't obsess on what has already happened.** Stay informed; but turn off the media and remove yourself emotionally from the painful reality of the disaster. Just because we live in a world with 24-hour news access doesn't mean that we have to remain glued to the television, radio or Internet.
- **Get involved.** Instead of worrying or shaking your fist at whatever happened, you can choose to be a part of the solution. Recognizing that you have choices is empowering in the aftermath of disaster.

Get help if emotions are overwhelming

Many people experience bad memories or dreams or have trouble sleeping, eating or focusing on important things in the aftermath of disaster. Mood swings, crying or getting angry can be signs of anxiety, depression or a stress disorder. You may need professional help if you feel that your emotions are overwhelming you. The toll-free number on this site can put you in contact with a professional in your area.

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