

Coping with Traumatic Stress

EMOTIONAL RECOVERY AFTER A DISASTER



The impact of a natural disaster or traumatic event goes far beyond physical damage. The emotional toll is often more devastating and longer-lasting. Just as it takes time to clear the rubble and repair the damage, it takes time to recover your emotional equilibrium and rebuild your life.

When disasters happen, you may experience a wide range of intense, confusing, and sometimes frightening emotions. The world may suddenly feel dangerous, unpredictable, and out of control. Everyone will react differently—and that’s okay. But there are specific things you can do to help yourself and your loved ones cope with the emotional aftermath of a traumatic event.

The emotional aftermath of traumatic events

Natural disasters and other catastrophic events, such as motor vehicle accidents, plane crashes, nuclear meltdowns, and terrorist attacks, are extraordinarily stressful—both to survivors and observers. Such disasters shatter your sense of security, making you feel helpless and vulnerable in a dangerous world. Whether or not you were directly impacted by the traumatic event, it’s normal to feel anxious, scared, and uncertain about what the future may bring.

Usually, these unsettling thoughts and feelings fade as life starts to return to normal. You can assist the process by keeping the following in mind:

People react in different ways to disasters and traumatic events. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to think, feel, or respond. Be tolerant of your own reactions and feelings, as well as the reactions and feelings of others. Don’t tell yourself (or anyone else) what you should be thinking, feeling, or doing.

Avoid obsessively thinking about the disastrous event. Repetitious thinking about fearful or painful experiences can overwhelm your nervous system trigger making it harder to think clearly and act appropriately.

Ignoring your feelings will slow the healing process. It may seem better in the moment to avoid experiencing your emotions, but they exist whether you're paying attention to them or not. Even intense feelings will pass if you simply allow yourself to feel what you feel—and you'll feel better afterwards.

Talking about what you feel may be difficult, but it will help you heal. Just as you may find it difficult to face your feelings head on, you may also find it difficult to express those feelings to others. But getting them out is essential. Talking with calm, caring person is best, but expressing your feelings through journaling, art, and other creative outlets can also help.

Common reactions to trauma and disaster

Following a traumatic event, it's normal to feel a wide range of intense emotions and physical reactions. These emotional reactions often come and go in waves. There may be times when you feel jumpy and anxious, and other times when you feel disconnected and numb.

Normal emotional responses to traumatic events

- **Shock and disbelief** – you may have a hard time accepting the reality of what happened
- **Fear** – that the same thing will happen again, or that you'll lose control or break down
- **Sadness** – particularly if people you know died
- **Helplessness** – the sudden, unpredictable nature of natural disasters and accidents may leave you feeling vulnerable and helpless.
- **Guilt** – that you survived when others died, or that you could have done more to help or prevent the situation.
- **Anger** – you may be angry at God or others you feel are responsible
- **Shame** – especially over feelings or fears you can't control
- **Relief** – you may feel relieved that the worst is over, and even hopeful that your life will return to normal

Normal physical stress responses to traumatic events

The symptoms of traumatic stress are not just emotional—they're also physical. It's important to know what the physical symptoms of stress look like, so they don't scare you. They will go away if you don't fight them:

- Trembling or shaking
- Pounding heart
- Rapid breathing
- Lump in throat; feeling choked up
- Stomach tightening or churning
- Feeling dizzy or faint
- Cold sweats
- Racing thoughts

Disaster recovery tip 1: Seek comfort and support

Natural disasters and other traumatic events turn your world upside down and shatter your sense of safety. In the aftermath, taking even small steps towards restoring safety and comfort can make a big difference.

Being proactive about your own and your family's situation and well-being (rather than passively waiting for someone else to help you) will help you feel less powerless and vulnerable. Focus on anything that helps you feel more calm, centered, and in control.

Reestablish a routine

There is comfort in the familiar. After a disaster, getting back—as much as possible—to your normal routine, will help you minimize traumatic stress, anxiety, and hopelessness. Even if your work or school routine is disrupted, you can structure your day with regular times for eating, sleeping, spending time with family, and relaxing.

Do things that keep your mind occupied (read, watch a good movie, cook, play with your kids), so you're not dedicating all your energy and attention to the traumatic event.

Connect with others

You may be tempted to withdraw from social activities and avoid others after experiencing a traumatic event or natural disaster. But it's important to stay connected to life and the people who care about you. Support from other people is vital to recovery from traumatic stress, so lean on your close friends and family members during this tough time.

- Spend time with loved ones.
- Connect with other survivors of the traumatic event or disaster.
- Do “normal” things with other people, things that have nothing to do with the disaster.
- Participate in memorials, events, and other public rituals.
- Take advantage of existing support groups: your church, community organizations, and tight-knit groups of family and friends.

Challenge your sense of helplessness

Trauma leaves you feeling powerless and vulnerable. It's important to remind yourself that you have strengths and coping skills that can get you through tough times.

One of the best ways to reclaim your sense of power is by helping others. Taking positive action directly challenges the sense of helplessness that contributes to trauma:

- comfort someone else
- volunteer your time
- give blood
- donate to your favorite charity

Disaster recovery tip 2: Minimize media exposure



In the wake of a traumatic event or disaster, it's important to protect yourself and your loved ones from unnecessary exposure to additional trauma and reminders of the traumatic event.

While some people regain a sense of control by watching media coverage of the event or observing the recovery effort, others find the reminders upsetting. Excessive exposure may be further traumatizing—in fact, retraumatization is common.

- Limit your media exposure to the disaster. Do not watch the news just before bed. Take a complete break if the coverage is making you feel overwhelmed
- Information gathering is healthy, but try to avoid morbid preoccupation with distressing images and video clips. Read the newspaper or magazines rather than watching television.
- Protect your children from seeing or hearing unnecessary reminders of the disaster or traumatic event
- After viewing disaster coverage, talk with your loved ones about the footage and what you're feeling

Disaster recovery tip 3: Acknowledge and accept your feelings

After a traumatic event, you may experience all kinds of difficult and surprising emotions, such as shock, anger, and guilt. Sometimes it may seem like the sadness and anxiety will never let up.

Sadness, grief, anger and fear are normal reactions to the loss of safety and security (as well as life, limb, and property) that comes in the wake of a disaster. Accepting these feelings as part of the grieving process, and allowing yourself to feel what you feel, is necessary for healing.

Dealing with traumatic grief and other painful emotions

- Give yourself time to heal and to mourn the losses you've experienced.
- Don't try to force the healing process.
- Be patient with the pace of recovery.
- Be prepared for difficult and volatile emotions.
- Allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling without judgment or guilt.
- Talk to someone you trust about what you're feeling.

Disaster recovery tip 4: Make stress reduction a priority

Almost everyone experiences signs of stress after going through a traumatic event. While a certain amount of stress is normal, and even helpful, as you face the challenges that come in the aftermath of a disaster, too much stress will you can also reduce stress by keeping yourself healthy.

Relaxation is a necessity, not a luxury

Traumatic stress takes a heavy toll on your mental and physical health. Making time for rest and relaxation will help you bring your brain and body back into balance.

- Do relaxing activities such as meditating, listening to soothing music, walking in a beautiful place, or visualizing a favorite spot.
- Schedule time for activities that bring you joy—a favorite hobby or pastime, a chat with a cherished friend.
- Use your downtime to relax. Savor a good meal, read a bestseller, take a bath, or enjoy an uplifting or funny movie.

How sleep can reduce traumatic stress

After experiencing a traumatic event, you may find it difficult to sleep. Worries and fears may keep you up at night or disturbing dreams may trouble you. Getting quality rest after a disaster is essential, since lack of sleep places considerable stress on your mind and body, and makes it more difficult to maintain your emotional balance.

As you work through the trauma-related stress, your sleep problems should disappear. But in the meantime, you can improve your sleep with the following strategies:

- Go to sleep and get up at the same time each day.
- Limit drinking, as alcohol disrupts sleep.
- Do something relaxing before bed, like listening to soothing music, reading a book, or meditating.
- Avoid caffeine in the afternoon or evening.
- Get regular exercise—but not too close to bedtime.