

Emotional Health Issues for Victims by the American Red Cross

Disasters affect people in many ways. In some disaster situations it may mean loss of loved ones, including relatives, friends, neighbors, or family pets. In others, it means loss of home and property, furnishings, and important or cherished belongings. Sometimes it means starting over with a new home or business. The emotional effects of loss and disruption may show up immediately or may appear many months later.

It is very important to understand that there is a natural grieving process following any loss, and that a disaster of any size will cause unusual and unwanted stress in those attempting to reconstruct their lives.

SOME INITIAL RESPONSES TO THE DISASTER

- Fear
- Disbelief
- Reluctance to abandon property
- Disorientation and numbing
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Need for information
- Seeking help for yourself and your family
- Helpfulness to other disaster victims

SOME LATER RESPONSES

- Change in appetite and digestive problems
- Difficulty in sleeping and headaches
- Anger and suspicion
- Apathy and depression
- Crying for "no apparent reason"
- Frustration and feelings of powerlessness over one's own future
- Increased effects of allergies, colds, and flu
- Feelings of being overwhelmed
- Moodiness and irritability
- Anxiety about the future
- Disappointment with, and rejection of, outside help
- Isolating oneself from family, friends, or social activities
- Guilt over not being able to prevent the disaster
- Domestic violence

SPECIAL EFFECTS ON YOUNG CHILDREN

- Return to earlier behavior, such as thumb sucking or bed wetting
- Clinging to parents
- Reluctance to go to bed
- Nightmares
- Fantasies that the disaster never happened
- Crying and screaming
- Withdrawal and immobility
- Refusal to attend school
- Problems at school and inability to concentrate

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP AFTER THE INITIAL CRISIS

Help for You and Your Family:

1. Recognize your own feelings.
2. Talk to others about your feelings; this will help relieve your stress and help you realize that your feelings are shared by other victims.
3. Accept help from others in the spirit in which it is given. Wouldn't you help them?
4. Whenever possible, take time off and do something you enjoy.
5. Get enough rest.
6. Get as much physical activity as possible, such as running or walking.
7. Give someone a hug; touching is very important.

Help for Your Child:

1. Talk with your child about his or her feelings and your feelings. You will find that many of your feelings are shared, regardless of your child's age. Encourage your child to draw pictures of the disaster. This will help you understand how he or she views what happened.
2. Talk with your child about what happened, providing factual information that she or he can understand.
3. Reassure your child that you and he or she are safe. Repeat this assurance as often as necessary.
4. Review safety procedures that are now in place, including the role your child can take.
5. Hold your child. Touching provides extra reassurance that someone is there for her or him.
6. Spend extra time with your child, especially at bedtime.
7. Relax rules, but maintain family structure and responsibility.
8. Praise and recognize responsible behavior.
9. Work closely with teachers, day-care personnel, baby-sitters and others who may not understand how the disaster has affected your child.

Help for Your Community:

1. Listen when you can to those who are having problems.
2. Share your own feelings about the disaster.
3. Be tolerant of the irritability and short tempers others show -- everyone is stressed at this time.
4. Share information on assistance being offered and possible resources.