

dealing with the effects of trauma

A disaster or major emergency is usually unexpected and may involve a threat to life or wellbeing.

Someone you know may be injured or even die. As a bystander you may see people get injured.

Under these circumstances it is normal to have an intense reaction even if you are only indirectly involved.

The effects of a traumatic incident are significant and can last a long time.

People react differently to disaster situations and the way they cope is very personal.

This brochure gives you information about possible reactions and how to deal with them.

Shock

Some people react with stunned disbelief or emotional numbness.

You may feel dazed or at times unable to move. It is not uncommon to have difficulty with your memory or feel as if your sense of time is distorted.

You may even begin to doubt what you saw or that it had any effect on you.

Physical reactions

Physical reactions may include nausea, pounding heart, trembling and tiredness.

You may also suffer profuse sweating, chills, diarrhoea or dizziness.

Head and muscle aches as well as sleeping difficulties and nightmares for at least a few days are not uncommon.

Thinking problems

You may have problems thinking clearly or remembering simple things.

You may also feel unable to stop thinking about what happened and keep asking yourself: 'What if I did something different, what if something else happened?'

Many people experience anger, anxiety or frustration. You may even find that you avoid friends and family.

You may have difficulty understanding what happened or feel an urgent need to talk with others.

Impact

The full impact of what you experience will often occur after the initial shock and denial have subsided.

You may have constant flashbacks where you keep imagining what happened and even think it is happening again. These experiences can be disturbing and you may think you are going crazy— you are not.

What you are experiencing are normal reactions to abnormal events. Over time these reactions should disappear.

It is important not to isolate yourself or use drugs or alcohol to cope. These only tend to make matters worse.

Shame or guilt

It is not uncommon to feel ashamed because you appear to be helpless, emotional and needing others.

You may feel ashamed because you have not reacted to the incident as you would have wished.

You may even feel guilty for having survived or for not having done enough for the victims of the tragedy.

Remember, it is not unusual for people to have some of these reactions for some time after a traumatic event has occurred.

Recovering from trauma

Recovering from a traumatic event is usually a painful process but it is also a natural process.

Talking with family, clergy and counsellors about what happened helps you recover.

It may also help to talk with survivors of the incident who understand what you have been through.

The more you talk about it with people who understand, the sooner the difficulties will pass.

Looking after yourself

It is important to look after yourself after a traumatic event by:

- keeping in touch with people you are comfortable with
- working reactions through rather than fighting them—they will generally soon subside
- talking about the event when you need to and expressing your changing feelings as they arise
- allowing yourself time to come to terms with what happened or what you saw rather than force the pace—it can take days to unwind
- taking time off work if you need to sort out what has happened
- eating well balanced meals regularly even if you don't feel like eating
- using physical exercise to work off tension
- trying relaxation exercises such as deep breathing to help you feel calmer.

When to seek help

Reactions to the trauma of disaster can often be more intense and last longer than people expect.

As it is an uncommon experience people may not understand what is happening to them.

It is important to seek professional help if you are experiencing any of the following:

- problems handling intense reactions or feelings
- worried by physical symptoms
- have no one to talk with
- continue to have disturbed sleep or nightmares
- find that relationships or family life are being affected
- realise your work performance is suffering.

Avoid waiting until you find you are not coping—see someone as soon as possible.

Often family and friends are good judges of when help is needed.

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Ways to help others

If someone close to you is going through stress reactions after this tragedy it may be helpful to follow some simple guidelines:

- stay with people while they are distressed
- help people who ask-but help them so they feel they can still be in control when they want to be
- help with practical tasks-these can be difficult to cope with for people deeply affected
- listen to the person's account of the events by keeping your questions of the situation to a minimum. Listen as long as they want to talk
- remind them to look after themselves physically - eat, rest and sleep
- reassure them about safety and security
- expect some moodiness and irritability
- continue with your own (and your family's) routine and allow the person some time to settle back into their own routine
- try not to make light of the situation or talking them out of their reactions-it takes time to recover.

Ways to help kids feel better

Parents can help re-establish their child's sense of safety, reassurance, self esteem and understanding.

- **Model calm and control.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Try to avoid appearing anxious or frightened. This doesn't mean you should not pay attention to and deal with your own feelings but that children benefit from seeing their parents coping effectively with difficult feelings.
- **Reassure children they are safe and (if true) so are other important adults in their lives.** Depending on the situation, point out things which help ensure their immediate safety and those around them.

- **Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge.** Explain that emergency workers, police, firefighters, doctors and nurses are helping people who are hurt and are working to ensure that no further tragedies occur.
- **Let children know it is okay to feel upset. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs.** Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is okay but children may need help and patience from adults to help them express these feelings appropriately.
- **Observe children's emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behaviour, appetite and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief.
- **Look for children at greater risk.** Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk than others for severe reactions. Seek the help of professionals if you are at all concerned.
- **Tell children the truth.** Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or it is not serious. Children are smart-they will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.
- **Stick to the facts.** Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.
- **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.** *Early primary school children* need brief, simple information which should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. *Upper primary and early middle school children* will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe. For all children, encourage them to talk through their thoughts and feelings.

The Department for Community Development is a government department responsible for managing emergency welfare services during disasters and emergencies.

The Department's Emergency Services Unit coordinates appropriate responses to disaster emergency welfare situations and liaises with emergency service organisations.

The Department can refer you to qualified people who can help you take charge of your recovery.

For counselling and support contact:

Crisis Care

Tel 9223 1111 or 1800 199 008 (freecall STD)

Emergency Services Unit

For disaster situations contact:

Emergency Services Unit

Tel 08 9277 0366

Fax 08 9277 0356

For more information see:

www.community.wa.gov.au

...disaster assistance



Department for
Community Development

