

Disaster Mental Health

Normal Reactions by Normal People to Abnormal Events

Human reactions to disaster

1. All people who experience a disaster are impacted by the disaster in some way.
2. Psychological reactions to disaster are normal reactions by normal people to abnormal events.
3. Disaster stress reactions usually diminish in severity over time. Should they become more severe as time passes, you may want to seek help from a mental health professional.

Helping others cope

1. Assure the person that her/his responses are normal.
2. Listen to her/his story.
3. Provide reassurance.
4. Give permission to repeat her/his story.
5. Allow tears and laughter.
6. Speak quietly and respectfully.
7. Demonstrate patience and kindness.
8. Provide services such as food, shelter and eyeglasses.
9. Assist the person in finding a meaningful way to contribute to the well-being of others; for example, reading a story to a child or holding the hand of an elderly person.
10. Provide referrals to mental health professionals as necessary.



Coping with disaster stress

1. Within 24 to 48 hours, engage in strenuous physical exercise (but not beyond what your doctor would recommend), alternated with periods of relaxation, to alleviate some of your physical reactions to stressful situations.
2. Structure your time with more care than usual. Alternate work time with play time.
3. Remind yourself that you are normal and are having normal reactions. Don't label yourself "crazy," "wacko," "weak," or "unfit."
4. Talk is one of the most healing medicines. Talk to people you know care about you. People do care. It is normal to want and to need to tell your story again and again.
5. Be aware of trying to numb the pain with drugs or alcohol. Don't complicate things further with substance abuse problems.
6. Keep your life as normal as possible.
7. Do things that make you feel good.
8. Don't make any big life changes.
9. Do make as many daily decisions as possible that will give you the feeling of control over your life.
10. It is all right to spend time by yourself.
11. Keep a journal. Writing during sleepless hours may help.
12. Realize that those around you are also under stress and may not act or react in a manner you might normally expect.
13. Help your loved ones, neighbors, and co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing. However, respect the feelings of those who do not want to talk about the incident.
14. Consult a mental health professional if you need assistance.

Neighborhood disaster responder self-care strategies

1. Stay active.
2. Work with your Response Team and avoid isolation.
3. Remind yourself that your job is important and contributes toward the success of the neighborhood response and overall well-being.
4. Drink fluids to avoid dehydration.
5. Avoid caffeine, sugar, and fatty foods.
6. Take rest breaks as needed.
7. Seek out additional support if you need help.

Normal responses to disaster include:

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| feelings of loss | guilt |
| hopelessness | anger |
| forgetfulness | irritability |
| feeling vulnerable | crying |
| difficulty concentrating | withdrawal |
| fatigue or difficulty sleeping | |
| eating too much or not enough | |