

Disaster Reactions: How to Cope with Them


When unexpected, traumatic events occur, it is normal to have strong physical and emotional reactions. Sometimes these appear immediately after the event, and sometimes they don't begin for several days, weeks or even months. While unpleasant, these reactions are normal and usually temporary, leaving no long-term effects on the individual experiencing them.

How strongly the event impacted the individual determines his or her response afterward, as do the person's past experiences, values, attitudes, beliefs and personal support systems. Some of the wide ranges of normal responses are listed below.

<u>EMOTIONAL</u>	<u>PHYSICAL</u>	<u>MENTAL</u>	<u>BEHAVIORAL</u>
Anxiety	Fatigue	Confusion	Isolation
Fearfulness	Twitching	Forgetfulness	Increased alcohol use
Numbness	Nausea	Distractibility	Increased drug use
Uncertainty	Headache	Impaired memory	Restlessness
Depression	Sleep problems	Poor judgment	Jumpiness
Anger	Sweating	Remembering past traumas	Interpersonal problems
Guilt	Dizziness	Flashbacks	Outbursts
Irritability	Intestinal problems	Poor concentration	Appetite changes
Grief	Breathing problems	Suspiciousness	Sleep disturbances
Vulnerability		Intrusive thoughts	Reduced sex drive
Disbelief		Nightmares	

While each of these can be an expected response to a crisis, there are things that can be done to reduce their impact and to help restore normal feeling and functioning.

- Remember you are normal and experiencing an expected, temporary response to a traumatic event. Healing from any injury takes time.
- Probably the most effective treatment for dealing with personal trauma is talking – to friends, loved ones, ministers or sometimes a counselor. Discussing the event repeatedly is a common, normal and helpful activity for many people who have undergone personal crises.
- If talking isn't possible, try writing out your thoughts and feelings. You might want to write to someone who is special, or to pretend you are writing to that person. You might want to write out your feelings to yourself. What is written doesn't need to be sent or shared with anyone else; just putting words to feelings is often helpful in clarifying emotions and reducing your stress.

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- Moderate physical exercise (walking, stretching, etc.), alternated with periods of relaxation, may be helpful, but consider seeing your doctor before starting any new exercise program to determine what type and amount is appropriate for you.
 - Drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, should be avoided. Instead, substitute other stress- reducing activities. While drugs may temporarily ease the symptoms of stress, they also mask emotions and feelings, perhaps slowing normal, overall recovery.
 - If reactions to the crisis are excessive, short-term use of medication, prescribed by a physician specifically for you, may be helpful and appropriate.
 - Be productive, and make as many daily decisions as possible, but don't make major life changes until you are sure the crisis has passed.
 - Concentrate on what you can control in your life, and work at letting go of those things you cannot control.
 - Use your support system – your friends, family, pets, religion, hobbies, sports, etc. Most people want to help but do not always know how. Tell people what you need and want, as well as what you don't.
 - Pamper yourself. Get plenty of rest. Eat regular meals even if you don't feel like it. Take precautions to be safe and comfortable. Be as self-nurturing as you can.
 - Spend time with others. Don't be alone if it makes you feel uncomfortable, or if isolating yourself is hampering the process of recovery.
 - Be patient with yourself, not critical. Recurring thoughts, flashbacks, restlessness, etc., will eventually stop. Give yourself permission to recover at your own pace. Remember that you are normal and having a normal reaction to an abnormal event. Be as loving to yourself as you would be to a loved one.

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