

Disaster Mental Health - Preparing Yourself Mentally for Disasters

Disorder caused by disasters disrupts the way we think and feel. Have you thought about how you can prepare yourself for the mental and emotional challenges of a disaster? Here are some tips about what to expect and how to make yourself more resilient for mental and emotional challenges before, during and after a disaster.

Before

The good news is that other actions you take for personal preparedness will improve your mental readiness for disasters. Because stress and fear from disasters make it hard for your brain to plan and make decisions, it is good to have plans and kits already available. **Having family plans and go-kits** on hand also reassures your brain that you have resources to manage the event. Regaining some sense of control during an emergency, like knowing how to communicate and bring your family back together, will soothe a lot of stress you feel.

You can also put items **in your go-kit for familiarity and comfort**. Consider what is it that makes you feel better when you're sad or anxious. Put that with your other supplies.

Practice good self-care and healthy habits. Stress and fear send hormones to your body that need to be flushed from your system in order to relax after the emergency passes. Healthy eating, lots of water (and less caffeine), good sleep and exercise enhance your body's ability to reset those hormone levels and ease feelings of anxiety.

Work on noticing your emotions. Don't suppress emotions because they are survival messages from your body. If you're feeling anxious, there is a reason. Instead, work on tolerating difficult emotions without automatically reacting. This will help you manage stressful emotions caused by disasters.

During

A traumatic event turns your world upside down. In the moment, people's reactions are driven for survival, and that can result in some surprising behaviors.

After surviving a disaster or act of violence, people may feel dazed or even numb. They may also feel sad, helpless or anxious. In spite of the tragedy, some people just feel happy to be alive.

It is not unusual to have bad memories or dreams. You may avoid places or people that remind you of the disaster. You might have trouble sleeping, eating, or paying attention. Many people have short tempers and get angry easily.

Know that these behaviors and reactions are **normal reactions to an abnormal situation**.

After

Be kind and understanding with yourself and others, and give yourself time to heal. The majority of people following disasters will recover on their own. You can help this along by:

- **Getting back to normal routines.** Disasters disrupt order, so it is good to put some structure and schedules back into your life. This should definitely include the self-care practices discussed previously, which will help your body reduce stress levels.
- **Talking about it.** Feelings of stress and fear are vague. Talking about exactly what it is that is bothering you in the moment helps identify a concrete issue. This will help focus your effort to choose resources that will help solve a particular problem.
- **Helping others.** We feel better about our control of a situation not just when we can help ourselves but also those around us.
- **Limit the amount of media you watch about the event.** Though we may know that the event is over, media coverage can give our bodies cues that the event is still happening. Not only can this increase our stress, but early coverage of an event will not necessarily give survivors resources to help their situation. Children especially are affected by continuing coverage of the event. Choose to only watch news coverage once a day.
- **Know that emotions are like waves: they will come and go.** There are reminders of the event (sights, sounds, anniversary dates) that can make those emotions come on strong, but they will ebb, especially if we practice good self-care.

There are times that the stress can be too much to handle alone.

Ask for help if you:

- Are not able to take care of yourself or your children.
- Are not able to do your job.
- Use alcohol or drugs to get away from your problems.
- Feel sad or depressed for more than two weeks
- Think about suicide.

Talk to a counselor, your doctor, or community organization, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK).

Social media posts

- Taking actions for personal preparedness can help your mental readiness for disaster. Having a family plan and go kit will help you both physically and emotionally.

- Having a good family emergency plan will help you gain some sense of control during an emergency and soothe stress. <http://www.readycolorado.com/ready-central/create-a-plan/>.
- Make sure to put items in your family preparedness kit to provide familiarity and comfort in a disaster. Typical items for a family preparedness kit are listed at <http://www.readycolorado.com/ready-central/build-a-kit/>.
- Healthy eating, lots of water (and less caffeine), good sleep and exercise enhance your body's ability to reset those hormone levels and ease feelings of anxiety during a disaster.
- It is not unusual to have bad memories or dreams following a disaster. You may avoid places or people that remind you of the disaster. You might have trouble sleeping, eating, or paying attention. Many people have short tempers and get angry easily. Know that these behaviors and reactions are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.
- After disaster, it is important to get back to a normal routine. This will help to reduce anxiety and stress levels.
- To reduce disaster-related anxiety and stress, limit the amount of media you watch about the event. Though we may know that the event is over, media coverage can give our bodies cues that the event is still happening. Not only can this increase our stress, but early coverage of an event will not necessarily give survivors resources to help their situation.
- Disaster-related stress is normal. However, it may be time to ask for help if you are not able to take care of yourself or your children, are not able to do your job, use alcohol or drugs to get away from your problems, feel sad or depressed for more than two weeks or think about suicide. For assistance, call 1-800-273-TALK.