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ANSWERS  
TO YOUR  
QUESTIONS ABOUT  
PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

# Managing Traumatic Stress

## *Tips for Recovering From Disasters and Other Traumatic Events*

*The September 11th terrorist attacks were the type of events we thought could never happen. Like other types of disasters they were unexpected, sudden and overwhelming. It is common for people who have experienced traumatic situations to have very strong emotional reactions. In some cases, there are no outwardly visible signs of physical injury, but there is nonetheless a serious emotional toll.*

*Understanding normal responses to these abnormal events can aid you in coping effectively with your feelings, thoughts, and actions, and help you along the path to recovery.*

### **What happens to people after a disaster or other traumatic event?**

Shock and denial are typical responses to disasters and other kinds of trauma, especially shortly after the event. Both shock and denial are normal protective reactions.

Shock is a sudden and often intense disturbance of your emotional state that may leave you feeling stunned or dazed. Denial involves your not acknowledging that something very stressful has happened, or not experiencing fully the intensity of the event. You may temporarily feel numb or disconnected from life.

As the initial shock subsides, reactions vary from one person to another. The following, however, are normal responses to a traumatic event:

**Feelings become intense and sometimes are unpredictable.** You might become more irritable than usual, and your mood may change back and forth dramatically. You might be especially anxious or nervous, or you might even become depressed.

**Thoughts and behavior patterns are affected by the trauma.** You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event. These flashbacks may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heart beat or sweating.

You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused. Sleep and eating patterns also may be disrupted.

**Recurring emotional reactions are common.** Anniversaries of the event, such as at one month or one year, as well as reminders such as aftershocks from earthquakes or the sounds of sirens, can trigger upsetting memories of the traumatic experience. These “triggers” may be accompanied by fears that the stressful event will be repeated.

**Interpersonal relationships often become strained.** Greater conflict, such as more frequent arguments with family members and coworkers, is common. On the other hand, you might become withdrawn and isolated and avoid your usual activities.

**Physical symptoms may accompany the extreme stress.** For example, headaches, nausea and chest pain may result and may require medical attention. Preexisting medical conditions may worsen due to the stress.

### **How do people respond differently over time?**

It is important for you to realize that there is not one “standard” pattern of reaction to the extreme stress of traumatic experiences. Some people respond immediately, while others have delayed reactions — sometimes months or even years later. Some have adverse effects for a long

period of time, while others recover rather quickly. And reactions can change over time. Some who have suffered from trauma are energized initially by the event to help them with the challenge of coping, only to later become discouraged or depressed.

A number of factors tend to affect the length of time required for recovery, including:

- ❖ **The degree of intensity and loss.** Events that last longer and pose a greater threat, and where loss of life or substantial loss of property is involved, often take longer to resolve.
- ❖ **A person's general ability to cope with emotionally challenging situations.** Individuals who have handled other difficult, stressful circumstances well may find it easier to cope with the trauma.
- ❖ **Other stressful events preceding the traumatic experience.** Individuals faced with other emotionally challenging situations, such as serious health problems or family-related difficulties, may have more intense reactions to the new stressful event and need more time to recover.

### How do I help myself and my family?

There are a number of steps you can take to help restore emotional well being and a sense of control following a disaster or other traumatic experience, including the following:

- ❖ **Give yourself time to heal.** Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- ❖ **Ask for support from people who care about you** and who will listen and empathize with your situation. But keep in mind that your typical support system may be weakened if those who are close to you also have experienced or witnessed the trauma.

Communicate your experience in whatever ways feel comfortable to you — such as by talking with family or close friends, or keeping a diary.

- ❖ **Find out about local support groups** that often are available such as for those who have suffered from natural disasters, or for women who are victims of rape. These can be especially helpful for people with limited personal support systems.

Try to find groups led by appropriately trained and

experienced professionals. Group discussion can help people realize that other individuals in the same circumstances often have similar reactions and emotions.

- ❖ **Engage in healthy behaviors** to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs.
- ❖ **Establish or reestablish routines** such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.
- ❖ **Avoid major life decisions** such as switching careers or jobs if possible because these activities tend to be highly stressful.
- ❖ **Become knowledgeable about what to expect** as a result of trauma. Some of the “Additional Resources” listed at the end of this fact sheet may help you with this learning process.

### How do I take care of children's special needs?

The intense anxiety and fear that often follow a disaster or other traumatic event can be especially troubling for children. Some may regress and demonstrate younger behaviors such as thumb sucking or bed wetting. Children may be more prone to nightmares and fear of sleeping alone. Performance in school may suffer. Other changes in behavior patterns may include throwing tantrums more frequently, or withdrawing and becoming more solitary.

There are several things parents and others who care for children can do to help alleviate the emotional consequences of trauma, including the following:

- ❖ **Spend more time with children and let them be more dependent on you** during the months following the trauma - for example, allowing your child to cling to you more often than usual. Physical affection is very comforting to children who have experienced trauma.
- ❖ **Provide play experiences to help relieve tension.** Younger children in particular may find it easier to share their ideas and feelings about the event through nonverbal activities such as drawing.
- ❖ **Encourage older children to speak** with you, and with one another, about their thoughts and feelings. This helps reduce their confusion and anxiety related to the

trauma. Respond to questions in terms they can comprehend. Reassure them repeatedly that you care about them and that you understand their fears and concerns.

❖ **Keep regular schedules** for activities such as eating, playing and going to bed to help restore a sense of security and normalcy.

### **When should I seek professional help?**

Some people are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by a natural disaster or other traumatic experience by using their own support systems. It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems persist and continue to interfere with daily living. For example, some may feel overwhelming nervousness or lingering sadness that adversely affects job performance and interpersonal relationships.

**Individuals with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional.** Psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers help educate people about normal responses to extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact.

**With children, continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the traumatic event, continued and extreme withdrawal, and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance.** A qualified mental health professional can help such children and their parents understand and deal with thoughts, feelings and behaviors that result from trauma.

### **What resources may I obtain from APA?**

**Talk to Someone Who Can Help**, a brochure about psychotherapy and choosing a psychologist from the American Psychological Association can be ordered free of charge. Call 1-800-964-2000

**Get the facts: How to find help through psychotherapy**, a brief question-and-answer guide that provides basic information about psychotherapy and how it can help. [www.helping.apa.org/therapy/psychotherapy.html](http://www.helping.apa.org/therapy/psychotherapy.html)

**Find a Psychologist**, information on how to be connected with the state psychological association referral network in your area. This information is also available by calling

1-800-964-2000, or on the web at [www.helping.apa.org/find.html](http://www.helping.apa.org/find.html)

**Coping with Terrorism**, a document that offers tips on managing this type of stress, can be found on the web at [www.helping.apa.org/daily/terrorism.html](http://www.helping.apa.org/daily/terrorism.html)

**I'll Know What To Do: A Kid's Guide to Natural Disasters**, Bonnie S. Mark, Ph.D., and Aviva Layton, illustrated by Michael Chesworth, a book that helps kids understand and cope with their feelings and reactions to frightening natural disasters, can be ordered online from [www.maginationpress.com](http://www.maginationpress.com)

**A Terrible Thing Happened**, a storybook for children who have witnessed a violent or traumatic event, can be ordered online from [www.maginationpress.com](http://www.maginationpress.com)

### **Additional Resources**

Other materials available via Internet offer additional information about coping with traumatic events:

The **American Red Cross** has several brochures available on line, including: *Helping Young Children Cope with Trauma*, *When Bad Things Happen*, *Disaster Preparedness for People with Disabilities*, and *How Do I Deal With My Feelings?* These documents can be retrieved and printed from the website at [www.redcross.org/pubs/dspubs/terrormat.html](http://www.redcross.org/pubs/dspubs/terrormat.html)

**Local chapters** of the American Red Cross may be able to direct you to additional resources. You can log on at [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org) and enter your zip code where it says "Find Your Local Red Cross." The contact information for your local chapter will also be available in your telephone book.

**National Organization for Victims Assistance**, 1730 Park Road, NW, Washington, D.C. 20010; toll-free 1-800-TRY-NOVA; in D.C. metropolitan area, (202) 232-6682; [www.try-nova.org](http://www.try-nova.org)

**Emotional Reactions to Disasters**, University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, is online at <http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~disaster/facts/emotion.html>

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