

Coping with Crisis and Disaster

Everyone experiences a crisis at some point during life. A crisis may be personal, such as a death or the loss of a relationship, or community-wide, such as a fire, natural disasters, sexual assault, abuse, the aftermath of suicide, or violent crime. Bystanders, friends and family of victims, or public safety personnel who work with disaster or trauma victims may also be affected. Each person responds to crisis or disaster differently.

It is important to understand the potential reactions that accompany crisis and to know how to care for yourself during times of extreme stress.

Typical Responses to Crisis/Disaster

Emotional Responses

- Shock or denial
- Anger or irritability
- Depression; feelings of hopelessness
- Fear and anxiety
- Mood changes
- Numbness
- Guilt
- Grief

Behavioral Responses

- Changes in activity level
- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Restlessness, agitation or pacing
- Eating or appetite changes
- Sleep disturbance/insomnia
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Inability to relax

Cognitive Responses

- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty making decisions
- Difficulty concentrating
- Dreams or nightmares of the event
- Confusion
- "Flashbacks" of crisis event
- Self-doubt

Physical Responses

- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Headaches and/or back pain
- GI distress, nausea, vomiting
- Muscle tension
- Trembling
- Rapid heart beat
- Sweating or chills
- Dizziness
- Exaggerated startle responses
- Weakness

Tips for Coping and Self-Care

- Reach out and make contact with others.
- Talk with friends and loved ones.
- Recognize and accept your feelings as "normal" responses to extreme circumstances.
- Express your feelings appropriately; keep a journal to help in the process.
- Structure your time.
- Maintain your usual schedule as much as you can.
- Get extra rest and set aside time to relax.
- Eat regular balanced meals even if you don't feel hungry.
- Exercise or participate in some regular physical activity.
- Delay major decisions or changes in your life.
- Avoid excessive use of alcohol or drugs.
- Consider professional counseling if symptoms persist.

How to Support a Friend in Crisis

- Reach out and spend time with the person in crisis.
- Make time to talk, encourage the person to express his/her feelings, and listen.
- Respect the person's need to spend time alone, too.
- Help with everyday tasks where possible; run errands, share a meal, pick up mail, care for a pet, etc.
- Don't try to offer false cheer or "fix things"; listening non-judgmentally is a powerful form of support.
- Help the person connect with supportive resources.
- Encourage the person to seek professional help when appropriate.
- Take care of yourself and know your own limits.