



Helping Yourself and Others After Disaster

Helping Yourself

When you have been affected by a natural disaster or tragedy, it may be very difficult to know what to do or what to expect. Whether you were actively involved in the event or even if you simply witnessed it, it's almost impossible to be left untouched by the experience.

Recovering from a traumatic experience like a disaster can often be a gradual and ongoing process. It may take longer than you had hoped or expected, but there are certain tips and procedures that can make a difference in your recovery journey.

- If it triggers negative emotions, avoid news coverage or social media commentary of the event.
- Accept that your feelings and emotions are a necessary part of the healing process.
- Don't judge yourself for your reactions.
- Don't be in a hurry. Let the healing process run its course.
- Avoid stressful situations.
- When you feel you're up to it, take small but positive steps back into your familiar routine.
- If you feel it will help, connect with others who shared your experience.
- Avoid excessive use of drugs and alcohol.
- Focus on self-care. Try to get adequate amounts of rest, exercise, and nutrition.



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There may be a desire to take the recovery journey alone to prove that you are strong enough to do so. But seeking help from those closest to you can be its own sign of strength. Lean on people you trust. Share your feelings with them. You may even find comfort in an organized support group.

In the first week or two after the event, you may experience a range of physical and emotional responses or symptoms related to trauma. These symptoms may include breathing difficulties, change in appetite, disrupted sleep, lack of focus, anger, fear, guilt, emotional numbness, and feelings of isolation and abandonment.

These symptoms are not things to be hidden or ignored. They are normal responses to abnormal events.

As time goes on, the symptoms often diminish. But if you feel you are not making progress, if you feel your symptoms are interfering with your ability to manage your daily life, or you find yourself over-indulging in drugs or alcohol, you may be suffering from Complicated/Traumatic Grief or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In these cases, seeking help from a mental health professional is an advisable course of action.

Helping Others

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a way you can provide support and assistance to those who were involved in or witnessed the event.

Given that disaster survivors often experience an extensive range of physical, psychological, behavioral, and spiritual reactions, Psychological First Aid is designed to reduce the initial stress and then help develop effective coping skills.

The eight core PFA actions are:

Contact and engagement – respond to (or initiate) contact in an unobtrusive manner.

Safety and comfort – enhance safety and provide physical and emotional comfort.

Stabilization – calm and orient emotionally overwhelmed survivors, as needed.

Information gathering – identify immediate needs and concerns and take suitable PFA action.

Practical Assistance – offer practical help in addressing survivors' immediate needs.

Connection with social supports – establish contact with primary sources of care and support.

Information on coping – provide information about stress reactions and coping mechanisms.

Linkage with collaborative services – link survivors with available services for immediate or future assistance.

Skills for Psychological Recovery (SPR) is another program designed to help and support disaster survivors, but this time taking a more long-term approach. SPR is not a mental health treatment per se, it is more of a secondary prevention model that can be delivered in a variety of public, communal, or private settings.

There is no right or wrong way to react to a disaster. Each person's response is unique to their own experience and circumstances. Whether it's helping yourself or helping others, the more you understand about what you or those around you are going through, you may find yourself becoming less fearful and more optimistic about an eventual recovery.