

Coping With Disaster

A disaster of any size will cause unusual stress in people who have been directly and indirectly impacted by it.

Each person will react differently and a range of responses to a disaster are normal and to be expected.

Emotional responses to disasters can appear immediately or sometimes months later. Understanding what you're feeling and taking positive steps can help you cope with this disaster.

Here are some common responses to disasters:

- Responses to Disaster
- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation, apathy and emotional numbing
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness and depression
- Feeling powerless



- Extreme hunger or lack of appetite
- Difficulty making decisions
- Crying for “no apparent reason”
- Headaches and stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Excessive drinking or drug use

Most of these reactions will decrease as time passes and you focus attention on daily activities. Everyone experiences stress differently, don't compare your progress with others around you or judge other people's reactions and emotions.

What You Can Do

- **Talk about it.** Not expressing your feelings will keep you from being able to work through what happened. By talking with others, you will relieve stress and realize that other people share your feelings.
- **Get plenty of rest and exercise.** Remember to eat well. Avoid excessive drinking and risk-taking activities.
- **Spend time with your family.** If you have any children, encourage them to discuss their concerns and feelings with you.
- **As soon as it feels comfortable,** go back to your usual routine.
- **Do things that you find relaxing** and soothing.
- **Recall other times** you have experienced strong emotions and how they were resolved.
- **Do something positive** that will help you gain a greater sense of control (for example, donate food or clothing).

If you feel overwhelmed by the disaster, ask for help. It's not a sign of weakness.

Talk with a trusted relative, friend, social worker, or clergy/faith community member.

People who have existing mental health problems and those who have survived past

trauma may also want to check in with a mental health care professional. Being unable to manage your responses to the disaster and resume your regular activities may be symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a real and treatable illness.

If you have strong feelings that won't go away or if you are troubled for longer than four to six weeks, you may want to seek professional help or contact Mental Health America of Greater Houston's partner, United Way of Greater Houston for help identifying a mental health professional.

For help, information, or referrals,

Dial 2-1-1

211 HELPLINE at United Way



2-1-1 is the number to call when you don't know who to call. Trained HELPLINE specialists are good listeners, blending understanding and expertise to provide information and referrals drawn from a comprehensive database of social services.

Mental Health America of Greater Houston, the area's oldest mental health education and advocacy organization, has been a proud United Way Agency shaping and responding to the mental health needs communities and all people since 1958.

www.mhahouston.org