

Loss & Grief in a Crisis

Dealing with Natural Disasters and Emergencies

Adapted From: 'Coping with a major personal crisis' Emergency REDiplan booklet, Australian Red Cross June 2008

Fact Sheet 4

Published January 2011

Emergencies by their very nature are disruptive and can be very stressful.

What you, your family or friends have experienced is a unique and personal event. It's normal to have a range of feelings in reaction to an abnormal situation like this. With time and helpful support, most people will cope with the stress of the crisis. Some people may need additional help to get through.

What you might be feeling

You may be going through a rollercoaster of reactions. Expressing your emotions does not mean you are out of control, weak or having a nervous breakdown. Remember these feelings – even the most intense ones – will usually only last for limited periods. Some common feelings you might have:

Shock and disbelief

- the event may seem unreal, like a film or a dream

Numbness

- your emotions may be cut off

Fear

- of death, injury or harm to yourself or family and friends
- of being left alone, or having to leave loved ones
- of breaking down or losing control
- of a similar event happening again

Helplessness

- crisis can reveal human frailty (as well as strength)
- longing for all that is gone
- for things that won't happen because of the event

Guilt

- for not helping or saving others
- for being alive and uninjured
- for being better off than others

Regret

- for things you did or didn't do or weren't able to do

Shame

- for not having felt or reacted the way you would have wished
- for having been helpless or emotion
- for having needed others

Euphoria

- joy of survival, excitement
- feeling close to everyone

Anger and frustration

- about what happened
- at whatever you believe caused it
- at the injustice and senselessness of it
- at the shame and indignity of it all

Disappointment

- feeling let down

Hope

- for the future or for better times.

Sometimes people block feelings fearing they are too painful, often by being over-busy. Constantly pushing feelings and memories out of your head may lead to loss of memory or concentration.

You may not be able to express or deal with your feelings immediately – you may take months or even years to fully experience them. The earlier you are able to deal with your feelings, the sooner healing can begin.

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The events and feelings may return to you in your thoughts, images, flashbacks, dreams and nightmares. You may remember past crises. These are normal ways to work your way through the impact of the event.

Physical reactions you might have

Your body, as well as your mind, may be affected by the event – immediately after and sometimes months later. Your physical health can affect your state of mind. Common reactions include:



- tiredness, sleep issues
- shakes, dizziness, palpitations
- difficulty in breathing and chest pains
- nausea, diarrhoea, vomiting
- muscular pain, headaches, neck or back pain
- menstrual disorders. Miscarriages may occur
- increased/decreased sexual desire or activity
- significant change in diet
- weight gain or loss
- inability to concentrate.

People who might need more help

Some people may find it more difficult to adjust, and may require more support from their community.

- people who are bereaved – when deaths are multiple, sudden, violent, or the body is not found, or when a child is involved all add to the burden of loss of your home and personal property
- people who have been evacuated or separated from family and friends
- those who are more physically isolated
- those newly arrived to an area, including recent migrants or refugees
- people who are unwell, either prior to or as a result of the event
- people with a physical or intellectual disability living in the community
- people with significant financial losses
- people who have been injured or witnessed a traumatic event
- emergency workers and volunteers – often witness injury and death but need to put their feelings on hold to continue helping
- elderly people - may find it harder to readjust because of reduced energy and limitations on social and economic resources required to rebuild their lives

Remember the general public – they may not be personally affected but grief takes on a public dimension, tragedy is often witnessed graphically via the media and people feel overwhelmed, helpless and even angry.

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Emergencies may put stress on relationships within the family and friendship circles. You might feel that your friends and family just don't understand; they weren't there.

Marriages may become strained when relationships are burdened by built up emotions, financial struggles and disruption to everyday life. It can be hard to tell your partner how you are really feeling.

Some friendships won't prove to be as supportive as you expected; others may be surprisingly stronger. In some cases you may form new friendships and relationships, particularly with people with whom you shared the event. Be prepared that community support and interest may dwindle over time but you will still be struggling to get back on your feet.

Do's

- do allow yourself time to talk, be angry, cry, laugh and grieve
- do allow children to share in your distress, it's alright if they see you cry
- do allow yourself time to be with people who care about you and also with people who went through what you went through
- do spend time alone when you need it
- do recognise that everyone expresses things differently. Men may find it harder to express emotion. Children may need encouragement to express themselves
- do take time out to sleep, rest, enjoy and do routine things when possible
- do allow your children to return to school and keep up with their activities as soon as they are ready
- do express your needs clearly and honestly to family, friends and officials.

Don'ts

- bottle up feelings
- don't avoid talking and thinking about what has happened.

Where to from here?

Consider professional assistance as preventative health care and get information and advice from your general practitioner, community health service, registered psychologist or counsellor.

Resources - further reading

For parents who are struggling to explain the concept of dying to preschool aged children in a supportive and appropriate way...

Book: *'What's Dead Mean?' by Doris Zagdanski*

For teenagers who may be experiencing grief for the first time...

Book: *'Something I've Never Felt Before: Teenagers & Grief' by Doris Zagdanski*

For friends, family, colleagues, counsellors and health care providers who are helping grieving people...

Book: *'33 Things to Say - when you know someone who is grieving' by Doris Zagdanski*