

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SAMHSA
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Tips for Survivors of a Disaster or Other Traumatic Event:
MANAGING STRESS

Important Things To Know About Disasters and Other Traumatic Events

If you were involved in a disaster such as a hurricane, flood, or even terrorism, or another traumatic event like a car crash, you may be affected personally regardless of whether you were hurt or lost a loved one. You can be affected just by witnessing a disaster or other traumatic event. It is common to show signs of stress after exposure to a disaster or other traumatic event, and it is important to monitor your physical and emotional health.

Possible Reactions to a Disaster or Other Traumatic Event

Try to identify your early warning signs of stress. Stress usually shows up in the four areas shown below, but everyone should check for ANY unusual stress responses after a disaster or other traumatic event. Below are some of the most common reactions.

YOU MAY FEEL EMOTIONALLY:

- Anxious or fearful
- Overwhelmed by sadness
- Angry, especially if the event involved violence
- Guilty, even when you had no control over the traumatic event
- Heroic, like you can do anything
- Like you have too much energy or no energy at all
- Disconnected, not caring about anything or anyone
- Numb, unable to feel either joy or sadness

YOU MAY HAVE PHYSICAL REACTIONS, SUCH AS:

- Having stomachaches or diarrhea
- Having headaches or other physical pains for no clear reason
- Eating too much or too little
- Sweating or having chills
- Getting tremors (shaking) or muscle twitches
- Being jumpy or easily startled

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After the Event

Managing Your Tasks

If you've been involved in a disaster or other traumatic event, a number of tasks likely require your attention fairly urgently. First, make sure you are not injured, as sometimes survivors don't realize they've been physically hurt until many hours later. If you realize you've been injured, seek medical treatment before you do anything else. If you need to find a safe place to stay, work on that task next. Make sure to let a family member or friend know where you are and how to reach you. Secure your identification and any other papers you may need, such as insurance, bank, property, and medical records. Completing one task at a time may help you feel like you are gaining back some control, so make a list of the most important things you need to do. Remember to be patient with yourself. Take deep breaths or gently stretch to calm yourself before you tackle each task. Plan to do something relaxing after working for a while.

YOU MAY HAVE BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS, SUCH AS:

- Having trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, sleeping too much, or trouble relaxing
- Noticing an increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels
- Feeling sad or crying frequently
- Using alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs or even prescription medication in an attempt to reduce distressing feelings or to forget
- Having outbursts of anger, feeling really irritated and blaming other people for everything
- Having difficulty accepting help or helping others
- Wanting to be alone most of the time and isolating yourself

YOU MAY EXPERIENCE PROBLEMS IN YOUR THINKING, SUCH AS:

- Having trouble remembering things
- Having trouble thinking clearly and concentrating
- Feeling confused
- Worrying a lot
- Having difficulty making decisions
- Having difficulty talking about what happened or listening to others

Practical Tips for Relieving Stress

These stress management activities seem to work well for most people. Use the ones that work for you.

Talk with others who understand and accept how you feel. Reach out to a trusted friend, family member, or faith-based leader to explore what meaning the event may have for you. Connect with other survivors of the disaster or other traumatic events and share your experience.

Body movement helps to get rid of the buildup of extra stress hormones. Exercise once daily or in smaller amounts throughout the day. Be careful not to lift heavy weights. You can damage your muscles if you have too much adrenaline in your system. If you don't like exercise, do something simple, like taking a walk, gently stretching, or meditating.

Take deep breaths. Most people can benefit from taking several deep breaths often throughout the day. Deep breathing can move stress out of your body and help you to calm yourself. It can even help stop a panic attack.

Listen to music. Music is a way to help your body relax naturally. Play music timed to the breath or to your heartbeat. Create a relaxing playlist for yourself and listen to it often.

Pay attention to your physical self. Make sure to get enough sleep and rest each day. Don't leave resting for the weekend. Eat healthy meals and snacks and make sure to drink plenty of water. Avoid caffeine, tobacco, and alcohol, especially in large amounts. Their effects are multiplied under stress and can be harmful, just making things worse.



Use known coping skills. How did you handle past traumatic events like a car crash or the death of a loved one? What helped then (e.g., spent time with family, went to a support group meeting)? Try using those coping skills now.

When Your Stress Is Getting the Best of You

Know that distressing feelings about a disaster or traumatic event usually fade over time (2–4 weeks after the event) as you get back to routines—and especially if you have engaged in some ways to help yourself. Try to use some of these tips several times a week.

If you or someone you care about continues to show signs of stress and you are becoming concerned about him or her, you may want to reach out for some extra help. Contact one of the **Helpful Resources** listed on the next page.

Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)
Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515
Website: http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Treatment Facility Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and español)
TDD: 1-866-889-2647
Website: http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/MHTreatmentLocator

MentalHealth.gov
Website: http://www.mentalhealth.gov
MentalHealth.gov provides U.S. government information and resources on mental health.

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357)
(24/7 English and español); TDD: 1-800-487-4889
Website: http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)
Website: http://www.samhsa.gov
This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.

Workplace Helpline
Toll-Free: 1-800-WORKPLACE (1-800-967-5752)
Website: http://workplace.samhsa.gov

Office for Victims of Crime*
Toll-Free: 1-800-851-3420, or 301-519-5500
TTY: 301-947-8374
Website: http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/ovcres/welcome.html

**Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

Disaster Distress Helpline

PHONE: 1-800-985-5990 TEXT: "TalkWithUs" to 66746
WEB: http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov

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HHS Publication No. SMA-13-4776
(Revised 2013)