

Self-Care After Disasters

Disasters affect people who experience and respond to the event. Natural and technological disasters impact survivors, bereaved family members, witnesses to the event, and friends of those involved.

Rescue workers, emergency medical and mental health care providers, and volunteers are also affected. Disasters can also impact members of the media, as well as citizens of the community, the country, and the world.

Disasters can cause a number of different [stress reactions](#) in those affected. The steps that can be taken for self-care after disasters to manage coping are also useful for those who are witness to a terrorist act.

What Can I Do?

There are many steps you can take to manage stress after a disaster. You should be aware, though, that healing doesn't mean you'll completely forget the event. You may still feel distress and pain when you think of it. Learn more about [Coping with Traumatic Stress Reactions \(en Español\)](#) to get better at managing your feelings of distress. You may also have more confidence that you will be able to cope.

In addition to those strategies, here are other helpful steps you can take after a disaster:

- **Remind yourself that stress reactions after disaster are common.** Know that you're not alone, weak, or "crazy." Most reactions fade with time. If they don't, there are usually free programs set up where you live that you can turn to for help after disasters.
- **Use problem-solving.** Remember that the long-term stress caused by disasters can reduce your ability to think clearly, be creative, and tackle problems. These problem-solving techniques can help:
 - Decide what are your most important problems.
 - Get the information and resources you need to deal with your problems.
 - Break problems down into small steps so you are not overwhelmed.
 - Ask for help from a friend, family member, or counselor to help you brainstorm.
 - Stay on track with your plan for dealing with your problems.
- **Spend time with or help others.** Disasters are unique types of trauma in that most often many people have been affected. Being with family, friends, neighbors, or others may help you realize that you are not the only one affected. Being with others helps rebuild trust in other people. Also, spending time with others gives you a chance to provide support or to help rebuild. Helping other people in need or working in your community can make you feel better about yourself. It can relieve stress to take your

mind off your own problems for awhile, and maybe you will see them in a different light. Providing support or rebuilding lifts your mood and makes you feel less alone.

- **If you are grieving, find a way to honor the losses.** Disasters can create a lot of loss in a person's life. Losses may include loved ones, friends, coworkers, pets, home, possessions, job, or quality of life. Try writing about your loss or creating a ritual, ceremony, or service to express your grief. Such practices can help you feel connected to a lost loved one. Rather than expecting to just "get over it" and move on with your life, it may help to take time to honor and affirm your relationships or values.
- **Take a broader view.** Make a list of your personal values. Pinpoint those things that the disaster highlighted as most important to you. Use this list to remind yourself of your goals and priorities. It can guide you to live your life in a way that is true to those values.
- **Practice helpful thinking.** Check out your thoughts. If they are causing you to feel stuck or helpless, try to think of more energizing, helpful thoughts. For example, if you find yourself thinking, "I can't do it," challenge yourself with questions such as:
 - "Is it really true that I can't do it?"
 - "Is it ALWAYS true?"
 - "Under what circumstances could I do it?"
 - "Could I do it if I had some help?"
- Then you can put in place a more helpful thought. In this case, you might say to yourself, "With the right help, I can get through this."
- **Take a time out if you're feeling angry.** The stress that comes along with disasters can create irritability and anger. This can affect your health, sense of self-control, and relationships. Anger can also increase your heart rate so much that you cannot clearly concentrate on the problem you are facing. Take a break to calm down before going into situations that anger you. This may help you keep a clear head. It may also preserve your health and relationships.
- **Plan ahead.** If you are afraid of future disasters, you may feel less worried if you learn more about the type of disaster that occurred. Then make up a plan:
 - Learn the warning signs of disaster.
 - Learn what you can expect to happen afterward.
 - Become prepared. Create an emergency preparedness kit for your family.
 - Take steps to make your house, job, or school safer.
 - Make and practice a family safety plan.
 - Have your children help, if they are able, with the preparations.

Summing It Up

The period following a disaster can be very stressful for survivors and many others who have been involved. Certain steps can help you manage stress and cope with the problems you face. Some strategies involve problem-solving skills and shifting your thoughts or outlook. Other steps highlight the support you can get from and give to others. The best results come from people working together to help each other after a disaster.

https://www.ptsd.va.gov/gethelp/disaster_selfcare.asp