

HOW TO RESPOND WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES

Recognize you may be in shock from a sudden event and subsequent losses. Like those around you, you may be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the events and not know what to do or how to cope.

Understand that you and your community may be feeling a sense of loss on multiple levels: loss of home, friends, family, pets, clothing, security, sense of community, neighborhood, car, jobs; delay or cancellation of special events such as weddings, graduations, special parties, etc.

Do what you can to stay as healthy as possible.

Figure out what you can realistically do to help. You are one person with certain skills and abilities. How can you best use them to help in this situation?

Take care in helping others. It is easy to get so busy helping others that you fail to address your own emotional and physical needs.

As much as possible, make time to do the normal, usual things in your life.

Connect with your spiritual community. The spiritual practices that provide comfort and meaning are very important during a time of crisis. Connect with those folks who share your value system and spend time with them.

Find a safe way to express your feelings and emotions. If talking helps, then by all means find those who can and will listen. If being physically active is more helpful, then find a way you can express yourself through exercise, sports, expressive arts, music, etc. Writing about the experience may be of value and comfort, and also serve as an outlet for the emotions you are feeling.

HELP FOR CHILDREN

Don't forget about the children in your life! It is easy to think if children have a place to sleep and food to eat that they are being cared for. Children who have witnessed a disaster event may be as affected and in need of support as adults. But that need may be overlooked, especially if a child is quiet and doesn't ask too many questions. While some children may want to talk about their reactions and needs resulting from the event, others may want to simply be near caring adults, and may find comfort in drawing about the event or engaging in play therapy or music therapy. A child may grieve for familiar routines, play areas, neighborhood friends, favorite toys or comfort items such as pillows, blankets or a favorite pet. When talking with a child, remember: tell the truth about what happened; use simple and easy-to-understand language; assure the child that their feelings are accepted; and encourage the child to ask any questions. Be especially sensitive to children who have questions of faith and spirituality. If it is your child, share the ways that your faith helps you cope with this crisis. In cases where you are dealing with children from other families, this is not a time to proselytize. Listen respectfully and help them identify the adults in their family and faith community who may be able to help. They may find it difficult to make sense of such bad things happening to them and the people they love. As a caring adult, you do not want to encourage a child to assume guilt that any of this happened because he/she was not a "good" boy or girl.

WHEN SHOULD YOU GET HELP?

As explained above, it is normal to be in shock, to feel sad, upset, angry, or unsettled, to want things to be the way they were before, to miss people, pets, routines, homes, etc. Those who have witnessed disaster events may feel all of these emotions, and others, for some weeks or months. Concern begins to build when these feelings become crippling, meaning you are unable to function at home, school or the work place. If you find yourself or loved ones pulling away from family and friends and routines, showing little or no emotion, or being overwhelmed with sadness to the point of failing to eat, shower, change clothes, and talking of not wanting to live, then it is time to immediately consult a physician, a grief counselor or a mental health provider. These professionals will find the best resources to meet the needs of the bereaved individual, whether that is through individual counseling, work with a therapist, beginning or changing medications, or participation in a bereavement support group.

Tragedies and disasters are indeed terrible events in our lives. The very nature of them – happening so quickly with little or no warning – makes it difficult for the survivors. There is no time to prepare, no thought that things might change or even could change so quickly, and perhaps little experience in dealing with such an event. Not only does this make coping with the event more difficult, but it also means that we have to stretch beyond our daily patterns to find resources and new ways to live and learn. Thus, the lasting lesson of any disaster is to be flexible. Be willing to ask questions and search for the support that you and your loved ones will need to go forward in a world that has suddenly changed.

COPING WITH DISASTROUS EVENTS

The earth starts to shake and buildings begin to buckle as people struggle to get to safe places. The water pulls back dramatically from the shoreline, only to come crashing back inland much farther than normal, sweeping cars, furniture, people and pets in its path. Sirens sound the alarm as dark clouds gather; a tornado forms and bears down on homes, schools, and businesses.

After the initial, awful event takes place, what happens next? Where do we turn for help? How do we cope?

KEY THINGS TO REMEMBER

A tragedy has taken place, changing – without warning – your entire world. Disasters take away homes, businesses, jobs, pets, friends, family members, familiar landmarks, and schools. Along with those things go our sense of stability, routines, familiar ways of doing things, financial security, not to mention the people and pets that are taken away by injury, displacement or death.

GRIEF RESPONSES

It is normal to be in shock; that is to be numb. The very fact that this happened so quickly may make it seem unreal. It becomes real through talking about the event and losses, viewing the affected area, visiting the injured, or attending funerals or other rituals. Because we are all different, there is no one “correct” way to respond to such loss, but there are some common reactions that many people experience. It is normal to feel fear, anger, anxiety, deep sadness, and despair. These grief responses are simply our way of coping with the sudden changes. At first, it can all seem overwhelming as if a tangled knot of emotions is swirling around inside our minds. Over time things settle a bit as we take steps to make sense of the many losses and develop strategies for coping.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Recognize that you need support. Talk with others who have gone through similar circumstances, learning from their experience how to cope and move forward. Reach out to area mental health professionals, online peer support groups, faith community leaders, family members and friends. Contact your local hospice for bereavement support groups and grief educational events.

Recognize that others need support, too. This may include friends, family, neighbors and colleagues who were also affected by the same event. Refer them to the support resources you have already identified.

For more information, visit www.hospicefoundation.org



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