

Disaster Psychology

Just as there are physical injuries possible following a disaster, there are most likely people with emotional trauma as well. During and in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, survivors and rescuers will experience, see, and hear unpleasant things.

Psychological trauma could result from:

- Personal or family losses
- Destruction in your own neighborhood
- Injury or death of neighbors and friends
- Not feeling safe and secure
- Being exposed to death and destruction



Survivors and rescuers can *both* struggle emotionally after a crisis. Watch yourself and others for symptoms of trauma.

Psychological Symptoms of Trauma

- Irritability or anger
- Self-blame or blaming others
- Isolation and withdrawal
- Fear of recurrence
- Feeling stunned, numb, overwhelmed
- Feeling helpless
- Mood swings
- Sadness, depression, and grief
- Denial
- Concentration and memory problems
- Relationship conflicts/marital discord

Physical Symptoms of Trauma

- Loss of appetite
- Headaches or chest pain
- Diarrhea, stomach pain, or nausea
- Hyperactivity
- Increase in alcohol or drug consumption
- Nightmares
- Inability to sleep
- Fatigue or low energy

Some will recover from major crises on their own and may not need or want professional help. In fact, *forcing* people to talk about a traumatic event might actually hurt them.

For others, psychological first aid and talking about the incident, *when they are ready*, can be very helpful.

Always remember to take care of yourself. Be aware of your own emotional and physical well-being when dealing with traumatized individuals.

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Psychological First Aid

It is important to learn the basics of psychological first aid, just like you would learn medical first aid. Here are some simple steps you can use to immediately help those who have been affected by a traumatic incident.

Step One: Safety, Stability, Comfort

- Ensure safety, and that you and the victim are out of harms way
- It's normal to be in shock when you are in a crisis. Let the person know its normal to feel a wide range of emotions, to feel out of control, and that all these feelings make sense given the situation they are in
- Ask them questions about where they are and their surroundings
- Use deep breathing exercises to help the person calm down
- Make sure the person has had food and is drinking water

Step Two: Information and Practical Help

- Get information on the person's immediate needs and provide practical support to meet those needs for the next few days
- Help them contact family to be sure they are safe
- If they have questions, help them understand the situation
- DON'T ask for details about what they have experienced

Step Three: Socially Connect

- The number one thing that helps people heal from trauma is connecting with people they are close to – family, friends, co-workers, teachers, their pets, their clergy
- Getting social support also sets into place the long-term support the person is going to need

Step Four: Encourage Coping

- Eating properly, getting enough sleep, and regular activity are critical elements of psychological first aid
- Identify ways of coping that work for them: music, exercise, hobbies, journaling, watching a movie or TV, reading a book

Step Five: Connect with Help

- Encouraging them to get help from a counselor or therapist can help them down the road
- It is OK to ask if they are having emotional difficulties, depression, or suicidal thoughts

Deep Breathing Exercise

A simple, deep breathing exercise can help a person calm down and refocus in a stressful situation.

1. Breathe in for a slow count of four
2. Hold the breath for a slow count of four
3. Slowly breath out for a slow count of four
4. Repeat three or four times

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