

Dealing With the Aftermath of Traumatic Events

The emotional impact of traumatic events can have devastating and long-lasting effects on the mental and emotional well-being of those involved or affected in some way by those events. When someone is exposed to traumatic events, such as a natural disaster, mass violence, or terrorism, it is important to monitor how the exposure to these events can affect him/her personally. Most people will show some signs of stress or distress. This is a normal response and as life gets back to a more normal routine, the signs of stress will usually decrease over time. Coping with personal trauma is a process through which each person moves, individually. However, when disaster strikes, it is not uncommon to feel frightened, restless, overwhelmed and vulnerable. Older adults may have a more difficult time coping because many have faced a previous event or disaster in the past. They may have already lived through World Wars, the Holocaust, the Great Depression or other hardships that can make it more difficult to deal with these increasing fears, which may be triggering depression, anxiety or helplessness. Children or younger adults may feel very vulnerable, have flashbacks, feel unsafe or need frequent reassurance that they personally will be alright.

Some Common Reactions to Disasters

- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation, apathy and emotional numbing
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness or depression
- Feeling powerless
- Over- or under eating
- Difficulty making decisions
- Crying for no apparent reason
- Physical ailments i.e. headaches or stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping

- Excessive drug or alcohol usage

People may experience one, several or all of these responses. Over time, these symptoms should begin to subside with refocus of attention on daily activities and return to normal life routines. However, since everyone experiences trauma differently, it is important not to compare one person's progress with another's. Additionally, it is important to refrain from judging other peoples' reactions and emotions.

Ways to Cope

- Talk about your experiences and your feelings with people you trust.
- Take care of yourself physically: eat correctly, sleep adequately, exercise fully.
- Be around other people and do not isolate yourself.
- Volunteer or get involved in community activities to redirect your focus.
- Do things you enjoy such as movies, gardening, dancing, etc.
- Remember to journal. Write about significant experiences in your life to express your feelings.
- Try to limit exposure to television, internet or newspapers which dwell on the event.
- If interested or capable, get involved in the disaster relief recovery program.
- Accept help from others, as needed.

It is important to return to a normal routine at a pace which is reasonable for the individual, however, if symptoms do not seem to be subsiding or if they are becoming more severe, it is recommended that contact is made with a mental health professional to talk about feelings regarding the traumatic event. Further, if the individual is already diagnosed with a mental health disorder, or is feeling distressed about traumatic events from their past, it may be important to talk with a mental health professional as a precautionary measure.

To find a mental health provider, the individual's primary care physician, local mental health center or local mental health association should be contacted for a referral. Many are listed in the yellow pages of the telephone book under "Mental Health Services".

It is also important to find someone with whom to talk who understands what has happened during the traumatic event. A competent mental health professional will provide not only

counseling but can offer support, guidance and practical suggestions during the recovery process. Allowing full expression of feelings, fears and anxieties can greatly aid in the healing process. For those who are filling the role of support person to someone who has experienced a traumatic event, here are some practical DO'S and DON'T'S:

Do Say:

- These are normal reactions to a disaster.
- It is understandable you feel this way.
- You are not going crazy.
- It wasn't your fault, you did the best you could.
- Things may never be the same, but they will get better, and you will feel better in time.

Don't Say:

- It could have been worse.
- You can always get another car/pet/ house.
- It's best if you just keep busy.
- I know just how you feel.
- You need to get on with your life.

The human desire to try to fix another's pain or make them feel better often prompts the need for the DON'T SAY list. However, these statements can often discount the survivor's feelings or experience. It is best when working with or listening to survivors to let them lead the way in the conversation. The listener can then provide appropriate support and comfort. (In some instances, the person may be experiencing disenfranchised grief which was addressed in the August 2007 issue of "Mental Health Matters".)

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Reference:

Phillips, M. (September 2007). Dealing with the aftermath of traumatic events. *Mental Health Matters*. 4(11). Gratiot Medical Center: An Affiliate of MidMichigan Health.