

# Common Reactions to Disasters

Most people involved in a traumatic incident experience some kind of emotional reaction. Although each person's experience is different, there are a number of common responses that are experienced by the majority of those involved. It is reassuring to know that, even though these feelings can be very unpleasant, they are NORMAL reactions in a normal person to an ABNORMAL event. You are not losing your mind or going crazy if you have these feelings. It is often difficult for those who were not involved to understand what the survivor is going through; you may wish to show this pamphlet to friends and relatives, and perhaps discuss your reactions with them.

Outlined below are some of the normal reactions to trauma:

## Emotional

### *Shock*

- disbelief at what happened
- feeling numb, as if things are unreal

### *Fear*

- of a recurrence
- for the safety of oneself or one's family
- apparently unrelated fears

### *Anger*

- at who caused it or "allowed it to happen"
- at the injustice and senselessness of it all
- generalised anger and irritability

### *Sadness*

- about the losses, both human and material
- about the loss of feelings of safety and security
- feeling depressed for no reason

### *Shame*

- for having appeared helpless or emotional
- for not behaving as you would have liked

## Physical

### *Sleep*

- difficulty getting off because of intrusive thoughts
- restless and disturbed sleep
- feeling tired and fatigued

### *Physical Problems*

- easily startled by noises
- general agitation and muscle tension
- palpitations, trembling or sweating
- breathing difficulties
- nausea, diarrhoea or constipation
- many other physical signs and symptoms

## Thinking

### *Memories*

- frequent thoughts or images of the incident
- thoughts or images of other frightening events
- flashbacks or a feeling of "reliving" the experience
- attempts to shut out the painful memories
- pictures of what happened jumping into your head
- dreams and nightmares about what happened
- unpleasant dreams of other frightening things
- difficulty making simple decisions
- inability to concentrate and memory problems

## Behaviour

### *Social*

- withdrawal from others and a need to be alone
- easily irritated by other people
- feelings of detachment from others
- loss of interest in normal activities and hobbies

### *Work*

- not wanting to go to work, poor motivation
- poor concentration and attention

### *Habits*

- increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs
- loss of appetite or increased eating
- loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- loss of sexual interest.

Remember that all responses are NORMAL to an ABNORMAL situation.

## **It will take time before you start to feel better**

You may have strong feelings right away. Or you may not notice a change until much later, after the crisis is over. Stress can change how you act with your friends and family. It will take time for you to feel better and for your life to return to normal. Give yourself time to heal.

## **These steps may help you feel better:**

A traumatic event disrupts your life. There is no simple fix to make things better right away. But there are actions that can help you, your family, and your community heal. Try to:

- Follow a normal routine as much as possible.
- Eat healthy meals. Be careful not to skip meals or to overeat.
- Exercise and stay active.
- Help other people in your community as a volunteer. Stay busy.
- Accept help from family, friends, co-workers, or other people you trust. Talk about your feelings with them.
- Limit your time around the sights and sounds of what happened. Don't dwell on TV, radio, or newspaper reports on the tragedy.

## **You may need further assistance if:**

The problems described above are particularly severe, or if they continue for more than five or six weeks.

You feel numb or empty and do not have appropriate feelings. You may find yourself keeping busy all the time in order to avoid the unpleasant thoughts and feelings.

You have no friends or family to whom you can talk about the experience and how you feel.

You are using alcohol or drugs to help you cope.

You have any other concerns about the way you or your family are coping and you would like to discuss the matter.

## **Sometimes the stress can be too much to handle alone**

Ask for help if you:

- Your emotions or physical symptoms are too intense or persistent.
- You feel too numb, cut off or you have to keep active in order not to feel.
- You continue to have nightmares, poor sleep or 'flashbacks'.
- Your family, social or work relationships suffer.
- Feel sad or depressed for more than two weeks
- Your performance suffers at school, work or at home.
- Use alcohol or drugs to get away from your problems.
- Are not able to take care of yourself or your children.
- You have accidents or illness.
- You have no one to talk to about your experience.
- You have lost faith in yourself or the world.

For further information go to: [www.moh.govt.nz](http://www.moh.govt.nz)