

Encourage Healing After a Disaster

Exposure to natural disasters — hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires — and manmade disasters — shootings, workplace violence, and war — may place a tremendous burden on our resilience, self esteem and ability to survive a disaster.

Psychology provides us with an understanding of how we might cope with some of these feelings. For example, it is normal to experience a wide range of emotional, behavioral and psychological reactions to trauma. Feelings of helplessness, anger, fear and sadness are expected, and allowing yourself to experience these feelings is necessary for healing. Over time, these feelings will begin to fade, but keep in mind grieving is a process that may take months or a year, or more to work through. It is not something that can be rushed. However, there are things you and your loved ones can do to encourage healing:

Connect with others.

It is important to seek comfort and support during this tough time. Check in with family members and friends to let them know you're OK — expressing your feelings to those close to you can facilitate your recovery and strengthen your resilience. Take advantage of a support or activity group — they help cultivate a sense of belonging. Connecting with others reaffirms that we are not alone in our struggles.

Think and act positively.

No doubt disasters and negative experiences are stressful and can leave us feeling pretty low. But, research suggests that even negative and painful experiences can lead to positive change. It is referred to as posttraumatic growth or more commonly, the "silver lining" in a bad situation. The intent of focusing on posttraumatic growth is not to minimize the impact of the disaster or emotional pain from it, but to refocus our attention to look for positive outcomes.

We all have strengths and coping skills to call on in difficult times — it helps to remind ourselves of this. One way to reclaim your sense of power or feel stronger is by helping others — try providing comfort to someone else or volunteering your time.

Stay informed.

Lack of knowledge and information leads to more anxiety followed by a greater sense of helplessness and increased frustration. Although we cannot solve everything or improve things instantly, staying informed and gathering information about an event helps us cope and strengthens our resilience. However, protect yourself and your loved ones from unnecessary and excessive exposure to news about the trauma and reminders of the event.

Establish some normalcy.

Getting back to our normal routine as much as possible or establishing a "new normal" helps to minimize traumatic stress, anxiety and hopelessness. It gives us a sense of control, even when faced with great odds. To the extent possible, keep occupied with regular activities — read, watch a movie, cook or play with your kids —so you're not dedicating all your energy and attention to the traumatic event.

Everyone has different needs and ways of coping. It's important to recognize that, although we cannot control what happened, we can control our response. Keep these tips in mind to help minimize the impact of a traumatic event on your emotional and psychological health.