

The Psychological Impact of Natural Disasters and Mass Casualty Events

Everyone who lives through a natural disaster or mass casualty event will react differently. While it is impossible to predict how any particular person may react, it is useful to know that a wide range of strong emotions and other reactions may occur during and after such an event.

During the event

During a natural disaster or another life-threatening event, the focus is often on survival. In general, the more you perceive that your safety or life is at risk, the more likely you are to experience intense reactions.

This is normal. When you perceive a serious and direct threat, the part of your brain whose job it is to watch out for threats and protect you from danger takes over. It automatically focuses you on trying to survive. During these times we all tend to act instinctively, and it becomes very difficult to think clearly or focus on anything but that sense of danger.

When the danger does not feel as acute (when things feel only slightly to moderately threatening) we are better able to help ourselves think clearly and rationally, plan, and make decisions, by deliberately doing things to help our body and brain calm down. For example, breathing slowly, deeply, and evenly, can help us feel less anxious and help avoid panic. These sorts of anxiety management techniques work best if we have regularly practiced them before the crisis.

During the first two weeks after the event

During the first two weeks after the event, you may experience a variety of normal reactions and responses:

- Immediately following the event, you will likely feel drained and exhausted. You have just spent a huge amount of energy trying to survive. Now is the time to take care of yourself and help yourself replenish your energy and coping resources.
- In the initial days after surviving a crisis event, you may find it difficult to sleep. Similarly, eating may have no appeal. Finding ways to eat and sleep normally again will go a long way towards aiding recovery, but sometimes it can take a few days to be able to feel relaxed enough to eat and sleep well. Proceed slowly and take a nurturing approach to your body. If you cannot eat a meal, eat small portions of fruits, vegetables, or nuts. If distressing thoughts bombard your mind when you try to sleep, consider playing soothing music or sounds, or read or watch something different and relaxing.
- Be aware that you may feel jumpy and vigilant. You may be sensitive to sounds like loud noises or overwhelmed by crowds or other very stimulating environments. You may have difficulty concentrating and feel a mixture of intense emotions (including guilt, shame, irritability, sadness, and grief).

- You may find yourself having nightmares about the event. This is your brain trying to process what you have been through. Dreaming and thinking about the event may not feel comfortable, but it can help you understanding and coming to terms with what you have been through. However, if you find yourself feeling overwhelmed by this, seek support from a counselor or mental health professional.
- After a crisis, survivors can have mixed feelings about what happened and how they and others acted. However, when your life has been threatened it can be more helpful to focus on appreciating that you survived than to judge *how* you survived. Remember that your brain and body were acting to try to keep you safe. While there are often important lessons to be learned from past experiences, we cannot change what has already happened. We must trust that we did the best we could in those moments.

All the reactions above are very common and are reported by people all over the world after a disaster or crisis. You may also notice other changes in your body, your emotions, your thoughts, and your relationships. Every person has their own reaction and pace of recovery and healing after a disaster. You will likely have some good days and some bad days along the way, as the intensity of your initial reactions begin to decrease.

There are many things you can do to support yourself during this time. Use your social support system and connect with loved ones. Share as much as you feel comfortable sharing about what you have been through. Do not pretend it did not happen but remember that you do not have to talk about it if you do not feel ready. Slow down and allow your mind, body, and spirit to recalibrate.

Four to six weeks after the event

As the days and then weeks go by, you should start to experience fewer reactions and signs of stress. Many of the reactions that you experienced during and immediately after the event should have begun to decrease or subside by now.

Sleeping and eating should have begun to return to normal, and you should feel less jumpy and tense. By now, your mind will likely have re-played the event numerous times as a way of trying to integrate and make sense of the experience. As you make sense of what happened and accept that you did what you needed to survive, the memory of the event will start to feel less intense and disconnected. You should be able to engage more fully in work and leisure now, even if you still think about the event.

Look for our companion resource, *Questions To Ask Yourself A Month After A Traumatic Event*, and spend some time answering those questions. If the event was extremely taxing or severe, it may be more difficult to come to terms with. If you are still feeling overwhelmed, highly anxious, numb, or are still experiencing other distressing reactions, consider seeking out for professional help so that a therapist or other helping professional can help guide you through the recovery process