



# COPING TIPS FOR TRAUMATIC EVENTS AND DISASTERS

**Emotional distress can happen before and after a disaster. Coping strategies include preparation, self-care and identifying support systems.**

**People can experience a wide range of emotions before and after a disaster or traumatic event. There's no right or wrong way to feel. However, it's important to find healthy ways to cope when these events happen.**

## **T**ake Care of Yourself and Your Loved Ones

Eating a healthy diet, avoiding the use of drugs and alcohol and getting regular exercise can reduce stress and anxiety. Activities as simple as taking a walk, stretching and deep breathing can help relieve stress.

### **Limit your consumption of news**

⇒ We live in a society where the news is available to us 24 hours a day via television, radio and the Internet.

The constant replay of news stories about a disaster or traumatic event can increase stress and anxiety and make some people relive the event over and over. Reduce the amount of news you watch and/or listen to and engage in relaxing activities to help you heal and move on.

### **Get enough “good” sleep**

⇒ Some people have difficulty falling asleep after a disaster, or wake up throughout the night. If you have trouble sleeping, only go to bed when you are ready to sleep, avoid using cell phones or laptops in bed and avoid drinking caffeine or alcohol at least one hour before going to bed.

If you wake up and can't fall back to sleep, try writing what's on your mind in a journal or on a sheet of paper.

### **Establish and maintain a routine**

⇒ Try to eat meals at regular times and put yourself on a sleep schedule to ensure an adequate amount of rest. Include a positive or fun activity in your schedule that you can look forward to each day or week. Schedule exercise into your daily routine as well, if possible

### **Avoid making major life decisions**

⇒ Doing things like switching jobs or careers can already be stressful and are even harder to adjust to directly after a disaster.

### **Understand there will be changes**

⇒ Disasters can destroy homes, schools, and places of business and worship and can disrupt the lives of people living in affected areas for a long time.

Sometimes, people lose loved ones or experience injuries, both physical and mental, that may last a lifetime.

Some people may also experience a temporary or permanent loss of employment.

For children, attending a new or temporary school may result in being separated from peers, or after-school activities may be disrupted.



# WARNING SIGNS AND RISK FACTORS FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS

## C hildren

Children are often the most vulnerable of those impacted during and after a disaster. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, a growing body of research has established that children as young as infancy may be affected by events that threaten their safety or the safety of their parents or caregivers.

Disasters are unfamiliar events that are not easily understood by children, who can find them emotionally confusing and frightening. During the time of turmoil, they may be left with a person unfamiliar to them and provided with limited information. Some warning signs of distress in children **ages 6 to 11** include:

- ⇒ Withdrawing from playgroups and friends
- ⇒ Competing more for the attention of parents and teachers
- ⇒ Being unwilling to leave home
- ⇒ Being less interested in schoolwork
- ⇒ Becoming aggressive
- ⇒ Having added conflict with peers or parents
- ⇒ Having difficulty concentrating

## T eens

For teens, the impact of disasters varies depending on how much of a disruption the disaster causes their family or community. Teens **ages 12 to 18** are likely to have physical complaints when under stress or be less interested in schoolwork, chores or other responsibilities.

Although some teens may compete vigorously for attention from parents and teachers after a disaster, they also may:

- ⇒ Become withdrawn
- ⇒ Resist authority
- ⇒ Become disruptive or aggressive at home or in the classroom
- ⇒ Experiment with high-risk behaviours such as underage drinking or prescription drug misuse and abuse

## C hildren & Teens most at risk for emotional distress include those who:

- ⇒ Survived a previous disaster
- ⇒ Experienced temporary living arrangements, loss of personal property and parental unemployment in a disaster
- ⇒ Lost a loved one or friend involved in a disaster

Most young people simply need additional time to experience their world as a secure place again and receive some emotional support to recover from their distress. The reactions of children and teens to a disaster are strongly influenced by how parents, relatives, teachers and caregivers respond to the event. They often turn to these individuals for comfort and help. Teachers and other mentors play an especially important role after a disaster or other crisis by reinforcing normal routines to the extent possible, especially if new routines have to be established.



# WARNING SIGNS AND RISK FACTORS FOR ADULTS

## **A** dults impacted by disaster are faced with the difficult challenge of balancing roles as first responders, survivors, and caregivers.

They are often overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of responsibility and immediate task of the crisis response and recovery at hand. They must also take the time to address their own physical and emotional needs as well as those of their family members and community.

Warnings signs of stress in adults may include:

- ⇒ Crying spells or bursts of anger
- ⇒ Difficulty eating
- ⇒ Losing interest in daily activities
- ⇒ Increasing physical distress symptoms such as headaches or stomach pains
- ⇒ Fatigue
- ⇒ Feeling guilty, helpless or hopeless
- ⇒ Avoiding family and friends

## **A** dults most at risk of experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder

Adults most at risk of experiencing severe emotional stress and post-traumatic stress disorder include those with a history of:

- ⇒ Exposure to other traumas, including severe accidents, abuse, assault, combat or rescue work
- ⇒ Chronic medical illness or psychological disorders
- ⇒ Chronic poverty, homelessness or discrimination
- ⇒ Recent or subsequent major life stressors or emotional strain, such as single parenting

## **A** dults most at risk for emotional stress

- ⇒ Those who survived a previous disaster
- ⇒ Those who lost a loved one or friend involved in a disaster
- ⇒ Those who lack economic stability and/or knowledge of the English language
- ⇒ Older adults that may lack mobility or independence

As with children and teens, adults also need time to get back into their normal routine. It is important that people try to accept whatever reactions they have related to the disaster. Take every day one-at-a-time and focus on taking care of your own disaster-related needs and those of your family.



# WARNING SIGNS & RISK FACTORS FOR FIRST RESPONDERS & RECOVERY WORKERS

## **F**irst responders and recovery workers include:

- ⇒ Fire fighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians, 000 operators and other fire, emergency and medical personnel
- ⇒ Military service men and women
- ⇒ Clergy
- ⇒ Staff and volunteers serving with disaster-relief organizations, including sheltering, animal rescue, food service and crisis counselling

First responders and recovery workers are not only physically and emotionally tested during an emergency, but they also may have loved ones in the area for whom they are concerned. They also are often the last to seek help for work-related stress.

## **W**arnings signs of stress in responders and recovery workers may include:

- ⇒ Experiencing a rapid heart rate, palpitations, muscle tensions, headaches and tremors
- ⇒ Feeling fear or terror in life-threatening situations or perceived danger, as well as anger and frustration
- ⇒ Being disoriented or confused, having difficulty solving problems and making decisions
- ⇒ Engaging in problematic or risky behaviours, such as taking unnecessary risks, failing to use personal protective equipment or refusing to follow orders or leave the scene
- ⇒ Becoming irritable or hostile in social situations, resorting to blaming and failing to support teammates

## **F**irst responders and recovery workers most at risk for emotional distress include those who have experienced:

- ⇒ Prolonged separation from loved ones
- ⇒ Life-threatening situations
- ⇒ Previous deployments that caused disruptions in home or work life
- ⇒ Trauma from having witnessed or been exposed in some way to difficult stories of survival or loss

For first responders, being prepared for the job and strengthening stress management skills before a disaster assignment is the best protection from stress. Responder stress can be diminished by practicing for the disaster role, developing a personal toolkit of stress management skills and preparing themselves and loved ones for a disaster.