



The **U**niversity of South Dakota.

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## **DISASTER MENTAL HEALTH INSTITUTE**

### **COPING WITH THE AFTERMATH OF WITNESSING A MAJOR DISASTER**

Below are some reactions common to people who experience traumatic stress as a result of witnessing a major disaster. Everyone who sees a disaster is affected by it in some way, and many may experience some negative reactions.

Witnessing a traumatic incident reminds us that we are also vulnerable to tragedy. Our protective belief that "nothing could happen to my family" can be momentarily stripped away. Parents may feel especially protective of their children, and children may feel anxious about their safety. Difficult questions may be asked.

The following thoughts, feelings and actions may vary in intensity and duration. Although they can be upsetting, it is important to remember that they are ordinary reactions to a frightening and extraordinary experience. They are likely to become less frequent and eventually disappear within the weeks ahead. If you continue to be concerned, you may want to seek professional assistance.

#### **Thoughts**

- Recurring dreams or nightmares about the event and its aftermath.
- Reconstructing in your mind the events surrounding the event itself or the damage, in an effort to make it come out differently.
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things.
- Questioning your spiritual or religious beliefs.
- Repeated thoughts or memories of loved ones who have died, or of the event itself or the damage which resulted from the event that are hard to stop.

#### **Feelings**

- Feeling numb, withdrawn, or disconnected.
- Feeling frightened or anxious when things like the sound of a heavy truck or particular smells remind you of the event.
- Feeling a lack of involvement or enjoyment in everyday activities.
- Feeling depressed, blue, or down much of the time.
- Feeling bursts of anger, or intense irritability.
- Feeling a sense of emptiness or hopelessness about the future.

#### **Behaviors**

- Being overprotective of your own and your family's safety.
- Isolating yourself from others.
- Becoming very alert at times, and startling easily.
- Having problems getting to sleep or staying asleep.



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- Avoiding activities that remind you of the event itself or the damage; avoiding places or people that bring back memories.
- Having increased conflict with family members.
- Keeping excessively busy to avoid thinking about the event and what has happened to you.
- Being tearful or crying for no apparent reason.

### **Physical Reactions**

**(If you have any concerns about your physical reactions, please consult with your physician.)**

- Stomach upset, nausea
- Diarrhea, intestinal cramps
- Elevated heart rate
- Elevated blood pressure
- Elevated blood sugar

### **Coping**

Healing and recovering from the emotional effects of the event can take a long how time. When you can, allow yourself to feel sadness and grief over what has happened. Talking to others about how you are feeling is important.

Try to keep in place family routines such as regular meal times and other family rituals. These will help you to feel as though your life has some sense of order.

Upsetting times can cause people to drink alcohol or to use drugs in a way that causes other problems. Try to cope with your stress without increasing your use of alcohol and drugs. Alcohol and drugs won't help in the long run.

Healthy practices such as eating well and getting enough sleep are especially important in times of high stress.

Forgive yourself and others when you act out because you are stressed. This is a difficult time, and everyone's emotions are closer to the surface. But also be certain that your stress does not become an excuse for child abuse or spouse abuse.

Don't let yourself become isolated. Maintain connections with your community friends, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, or church members. Talk about your experiences with them.

### **When to Seek Support from a Mental Health Professional**

A few general guidelines may be useful in deciding when normal reactions to disaster become problems requiring assistance:

- 1) when disturbing behaviors or emotions last more than six to eight weeks;
- 2) when a person's behaviors or emotions make it difficult to function normally (including functioning at work, in the family, or at school); or
- 3) any time an individual feels unstable or concerned about his or her behaviors or emotions.

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