

Minnesota Department of Health Fact Sheet

When Terrible Things Happen

What You May Experience

There are a wide variety of positive and negative reactions that survivors can experience during and immediately after a disaster.

Common negative reactions that may continue include:

Intrusive reactions

- Distressing thoughts or images of the event while awake or dreaming
- Upsetting emotional or physical reactions to reminders of the experience
- Feeling like the experience is happening all over again ("flashback")

Avoidance and withdrawal reactions

- Avoid talking, thinking, and having feelings about the traumatic event
- Avoid reminders of the event (places and people connected to what happened)
- Restricted emotions; feeling numb
- Feelings of detachment and estrangement from others; social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in usually pleasurable activities

Physical arousal reactions

- Constantly being "on the lookout" for danger, startling easily, or being jumpy
- Irritability or outbursts of anger, feeling "on edge"
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep, problems concentrating or paying attention

Reactions to trauma and loss reminders

- Reactions to places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that are reminders of the disaster
- Reminders can bring on distressing mental images, thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions

What Helps

- Talking to another person for support or spending time with others
- Focusing on something practical that you can do right now to manage the situation better
- Using relaxation methods (breathing exercises, meditation, calming self-talk, soothing music)



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- Engaging in positive distracting activities (sports, hobbies, reading)
- Getting adequate rest and eating healthy meals
- Trying to maintain a normal schedule
- Participating in a support group

What Doesn't Help

- Using alcohol or drugs to cope
- Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking about the event or a death of a loved one
- Extreme withdrawal from family or friends
- Withdrawing from pleasant activities
- Excessive TV or computer games
- Doing risky things (driving recklessly, substance abuse, not taking adequate precautions)

- Blaming others

How Do I Know if I Need Professional Help?

In general, professional support is a good idea if you're having trouble coping on your own.

Strong feelings that won't go away, that last longer than a few weeks, or are interfering with normal functioning may be symptoms of depression, anxiety, or a post-traumatic reaction.

Many people do not seek professional help because they blame their symptoms on personal weakness or think that they should deal with their problems on their own. Many people, however, find that counseling helps them deal with their feelings more effectively.

Contact your local public health agency for more information. If you need the phone number, please call MDH at 651-201-5000.

Adapted from NCTSN "Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide"



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