

After the emergency: coping with a major personal crisis

Vivian Schenker (VS) from Australian Red Cross talks to Dr Rob Gordon (RG), a clinical psychologist with many years experience in advising the Red Cross and governments on disaster related matters.

This podcast may be downloaded from www.redcross.org.au

Introduction

VS: Hello, my name is Vivian Schenker and this podcast is one of a series of guides to help you or your family, friends or colleagues deal with the effects of a disaster. Australian Red Cross has a long history of helping people when disasters strike.

The Emergency REDiPlan project is an Australian Red Cross initiative aimed at assisting households and communities prepare for and recover from disasters and emergencies.

I'm talking to Dr Rob Gordon about how people are emotionally affected after a disaster and the steps they can take to help themselves through this period. Rob is a clinical psychologist with many years experience in advising governments and the Red Cross on how they can help people when they've been affected by an emergency.

VS: *Rob, how do people react after a disaster?*

RG: Well, Vivian, the most important thing to understand is how people are pushed into an extreme state of survival by the threat of the disaster, whether it be a criminal event or a natural disaster and they've often had to do quite unusual things to survive and what that does is actually switch on a whole lot of mechanisms in our brain that push us into overdrive and adrenalin is pumping and that means people often become very focused and shut down a whole lot of reactions in themselves in the short term that might have got in the way. For example, they often don't feel pain or fatigue or discomfort and when they come out of the threat, these things can then come up and make them feel suddenly exhausted, confused and those reactions of emotion that have been shut down come bubbling up and so you get a whole range of different emotions depending on the person and the situation – fear, distress, anger, guilt, I should have done better and whatever else is relevant to them.

VS: *Is there such a thing as a normal reaction?*

RG: Well, what we can say is normal is that the person should react and there should be a high level of emotion for most people. Some people remain

disconnected for quite some time. They might complain of feelings of numbness but that too is quite a common reaction. What we would expect as part of normal reactions is that whatever intense feelings and reactions and bodily states they do experience will slowly start to subside over the next few weeks. What's often important for people to understand is that a really threatening disaster is a little bit different from the kind of normal crisis that we can have as part of our daily lives and in those cases, we usually expect to get over it in a few days but if we've been really pushed near the limits, then it usually takes a few weeks – and by that, I mean somewhere between about 3 and 6 weeks – for people to really settle down and come back to somewhere near their baseline.

VS *And Rob, is there a difference to the way people react to natural and non-natural disasters, things like terrorist attacks or you know, physical events like that?*

RG: Yes. Once you've got people involved in causing the damage and destruction, there are a lot more confused feelings and there's anger, there's disbelief. In a way, it goes against some of the basic assumptions we have about society and other people and the environment of our daily lives. But having said that, I think one of the important things is death and injury - that where there are high levels of dead and injured, whether it be natural or non-natural – there will be very much higher levels of distress.

VS: *How long does the recovery process take?*

RG: I think what we've got to remember is that people's lives are seriously derailed by an event. If they've had a natural disaster, they may have lost houses and property or if they haven't, the environment – the physical environment, the social life within that – has been severely disrupted and it's - the pace of recovery is going to be linked with the re-establishment, not only of people's houses but the whole infrastructure of the community. So much of our lives is based on community processes. So that's going to take several years. When we look at the tragedy of people losing their lives or being severely injured, then again, we would have to say it's really not until a couple of years have passed before people have started to build new routines and work out how to place this loss in some framework that gives them a sense of future again. So I'd say in general, we should be looking at a period of a couple of years at least.

VS: *And do some people never recover?*

RG: Yes. That sadly happens. I think there are a couple of reasons why that happens. One is that they become very focused on something that interrupts their recovery. One thing that we find is difficulty for people there, is when they become very focused on blaming somebody for the event and wanting somebody to make up for it, whether it be a government agency or another person or an organisation, because sadly, often – particularly if legal processes get involved, they don't get what they want and so they are stuck with a sense of injustice and unfairness. In the end, those people that recover are often the ones that say, 'Well, it's happened.

There's nothing I can do about that but what I can do is reconstruct my life and not allow this person or this event to ruin my life' and in a way that means letting go of some of the really strongly held feelings we have about fairness. Another thing that can stop people recovering is that they actually lose structures in their life. They might lose resources. They suffer serious financial hardship and this can actually alter the whole structure of their lives and this is why, I think, in the last 20 years since I've been involved in disasters, both governments and organisations like Red Cross have increasingly recognised the need to give people a bit of a leg up and help them get through this. So people who don't recover well, often have not always made the full use of the services available and they go into a state of depression or they don't have the assistance to re-plan their financial arrangements and so they don't get through it.

VS: *Well, you've touched on some of it but how else can people help themselves through this period?*

RG: One of the things that people can do is to get information to help them understand what's going on and one of the things we need people to understand is the highly stressful nature of the recovery period. It's stressful because not only is it painful and distressing and unusual and threatening but there's so much to do, whether you're dealing with insurance companies or re-planning how you run your life without somebody and people are having to go and go and go and when we do that, we must do what we need to survive and so naturally people shut down what's going on inside them and once you've shut down on what's going on inside you, you've actually stopped taking care of yourself and that's when people can run and run until they run out of steam and then we see some of the really difficult problems and they can be that they no longer have the energy to manage their emotions and suddenly they feel overwhelmed and distressed and another problem is that they get so physically exhausted, they can't think clearly and make decisions. The third one is they don't feel able to keep in touch with their social networks and the people that are really there to support them. So if they understand that, then we can give them some very simple guidelines about protecting themselves from stress.

VS: *Well, what are those simple do's and don'ts?*

RG: The first one is make sure that you don't put aside all the positive sides of your life, all the things that give you input, give you enjoyment, give you a sense of meaning. Don't put them all aside just to try and deal with the problems because the real message we want people to understand is, you won't make it through to the other side without feeling totally exhausted. So, plan for the long term. We've talked about that 2 year timeframe and make sure you hang on to the quality experiences, times with your family, with your friends, with your loved ones, time out from the environment, breaks, coming back down to earth, relaxing and trying to get something that will put things back into perspective.

VS: *Rob, what can people do to manage their stress?*

RG: Well, there are some very simple things people can do. The first thing they can do is to take regular, low impact exercise. That means walking, swimming, not playing squash or mountain climbing but just the kind of exercise that leaves you feeling relaxed and tired because we know that what this does is it actually drains a lot of the stress chemicals out of the body and re-engages the feeling of fatigue that will make us seek rest. Another thing we need to do is to try to avoid stimulants and have a very good, balanced diet. What the natural tendency can be in stress is I've got a high of adrenalin and then I feel low so I look for cups of coffee and sugar and this means our bodies are going up and down, up and down, with energy. We want to level that out by eating good food, protein, wholemeal foods and vegetables because what we've got to understand is, if we use up all our resources, we're going to get very depleted in the future. So good nourishment, relaxation times, actually making space where you can actually unwind.

VS: *Taking care of yourself?*

RG: Yes. Breathing calmly, listening to music, walking. Even if you're feeling sad when you're doing that, take care of your body. When your body's got the energy, you're going to be much better able to manage emotions.

VS: *They're the things you can do to help yourself. What about your friends and your family? What can they do to help you through?*

RG: The first thing is practical assistance. Find out what your friend or loved one needs done and that may be answer phone calls, read letters. Sometimes people can't make sense of official letters. You need someone to read the letter and tell you what to do. So there are lots of practical tasks. Then we would say simply be available to talk. You know, when we talk about what's going on for us, we often are putting into words and clarifying what is otherwise just a vague hotch-potch of emotions and feelings and when we speak about it, when someone's interested enough to say, 'What's going on? How is it now?', then we crystallise it, we have to explain it to them and that's when we often hear ourselves saying things. We become clearer about it and this is often the point where we can start to think about where we go from there. So I'd say communication, practical support and working out what they want. Do they want you to be there? Do they want a bit of time to themselves? Letting them give the signals. Don't tell them what to do. They'll know what they need to do.

VS: *Because the big question facing anybody in that situation is - do I pretend nothing's happened and go on as normal or do I encourage them to talk about it if it makes them very sad?*

RG: Don't be frightened of sadness. Don't be frightened of emotion because that's what makes it real and it's making it a reality of the experience in our lives that enables us to move on and so I think what I'd say to friends and loved ones is, speak about it as a fact that's happened and probably you'll find there'll be a surge of emotion and then the person will settle and if you can stay interested, then they'll

really start talking about what it does mean and that's when the really constructive thinking starts going on.

VS: *Do the same things apply to children, to helping children deal with a crisis like this?*

RG: Yes. We find that children take their lead from parents and what we've got to be aware of is that children love their parents and when they see their parents upset, the first thing they want to do is to protect the parents. So it's quite a common theme that children will hold back their reactions and the parents will think they're unaffected until the parents are out the other side and starting to settle down and then suddenly the children are presenting problems that they haven't had anyone helping them with for maybe a couple of years and then when that happens, suddenly when the parents think it's all over, they've got children with difficulties to deal with. So I'd be saying, 'Keep it open. Keep the communication going. Keep the emotions flowing. When the distress and the tears are there, comfort each other because it doesn't last that long. The tears move through, half an hour, three-quarters of an hour and then people are feeling a bit too tired to cry and they're starting to settle down and often after a period like that, you can look back and say, 'I actually feel a bit better. I've expressed it and I feel like having a rest and then having another go at it'.

VS: *Can most people get through without professional assistance?*

RG: We find that most people do recover very well from disasters over time and most people don't seek professional assistance but we want to take professional assistance out of its normal framework and recognise that what we're talking about here is preventive health care, that people are getting information and advice early in the piece so that they can not fall into states of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress but can actually move through it and often we do need information. Everybody needs information.

VS: *What are the triggers – where you think to yourself really, 'This is the point at which I need some professional help'?*

RG: Well, I think the important ones would be whenever you've got a sense that your recovery process is stalled and not moving through. You're stuck in the same loops or when the emotions are so intense that they're disrupting your ability to deal with the normal things in life or when you just feel bad and you don't know quite how you're going to manage because all of these things are based on something going on for you and it's often very hard to recognise it but someone's who's trained to sit down and look at the factors involved and help you have another view and have a few strategies can help make a difference. Another thing I would be emphasising there is, if a person's physical health is failing because often when we're in that stress mode, what starts to give out first will be our health – digestion, sleeping, skin complaints, aches and pains, headaches – any of these low-grade, physical conditions. I'd be saying to people, 'Don't just ignore them,

deal with them because they'll build up and they'll undermine your ability to cope' and I'd say to people who are going to move into recovery mode, 'Involve other people in maintaining your physical health. Go to your GP for a check up and just help - somebody else help you keep track of things and advise you about taking good care of yourself'.

VS: Dr Rob Gordon, thank you very much. The information contained in this podcast is made available by Red Cross in good faith to provide general information to people about some of the issues they may face after a disaster. We strongly encourage individuals to seek advice about the particular issues they're facing from suitably qualified professionals such as a GP, a registered clinical psychologist or a community health service.

In summary, the important things to remember are:

- people all react differently to disasters.
- It may take some people up to 2 years to feel they're getting through it.
- Many people will manage well through this period with good support from family and friends and
- where people are finding it difficult to manage their emotions, they should seek professional assistance.

This podcast has been made possible through the generous support of the First National Foundation partnering Red Cross in the Emergency REDiPlan project.

END OF TRANSCRIPT