



Australian Red Cross

Coping with a major personal crisis

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power of
humanity





Introduction

Emergencies by their very nature are disruptive and can be very stressful. What you, your family or friends have experienced is a unique and personal event. It's normal to have a range of feelings in reaction to an abnormal situation like this.

With time, and some simple steps, most people will cope well with the stress of the emergency. Some people may need additional help to get through. This booklet contains information about some of these reactions and suggests ways to cope after an emergency.

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Updated by Ruth Wraith and John Richardson, June 2008.

This information booklet is designed to assist people to deal with the effects of a major personal crisis but necessarily contains only information of a general nature that may not be appropriate in all situations. Before taking any action you should independently consider whether that action is appropriate in the light of your own circumstances.

What you might be feeling

You will most likely have a range of feelings after a major crisis. Expressing your emotions does not mean you are out of control, weak or having a nervous breakdown. Remember these feelings—even the most intense ones—will usually only last for limited periods.

Some common feelings you might have:

Shock and disbelief

- ▶ the event may seem unreal, like a film or a dream

Numbness

- ▶ your emotions may be cut off

Fear

- ▶ of death, injury or harm to yourself or family and friends
- ▶ of being left alone, or having to leave loved ones
- ▶ of breaking down or losing control
- ▶ of a similar event happening again

Helplessness

- ▶ crisis can reveal human frailty (as well as strength)

Longing

- ▶ for all that is gone
- ▶ for things that won't happen because of the event

Guilt

- ▶ for not helping or saving others
- ▶ for being alive and uninjured
- ▶ for being better off than others

Regret

- ▶ for things you did or didn't do or weren't able to do

Shame

- ▶ for not having felt or reacted the way you would have wished
- ▶ for having been helpless or emotional
- ▶ for having needed others

Euphoria

- ▶ joy of survival, excitement
- ▶ feeling close to everyone

Anger and frustration

- ▶ about what happened
- ▶ at whatever you believe caused it or allowed it to happen
- ▶ at the injustice and senselessness of it all
- ▶ at the shame and indignity of it all

Disappointment

- ▶ feeling let down

Hope

- ▶ for the future
- ▶ for better times.

These feelings are common and normal. Allowing yourself to express them will help with healing.

Sometimes people block feelings fearing they are too painful, often by being over-busy. Constantly pushing feelings and memories out of your head may lead to loss of memory or concentration and fuzziness of the mind. You may not be able to express or deal with your feelings immediately—you may take months or even years to fully experience them. The earlier you are able to deal with your feelings, the sooner healing can begin.

Prolonged blocking of feelings may lead to difficulties. If these feelings continue for an extended period you should seek professional help.

Remembering and memories

The events and feelings may return to you in your thoughts, daydreams, images, flashbacks, dreams and nightmares. You may remember past crises. These are normal ways to work your way through the impact of the event.

Physical reactions you might have

Your body, as well as your mind, may be affected by the event—immediately after and sometimes months later. Your physical health can affect your state of mind.

Common reactions include:

- ▶ tiredness, sleep issues
- ▶ shakes, dizziness, palpitations
- ▶ difficulty in breathing, choking in the throat and chest pains
- ▶ nausea, diarrhoea, vomiting
- ▶ muscular tension or pain, headaches, neck or back pain
- ▶ menstrual disorders.
- ▶ miscarriages may occur
- ▶ increased or decreased sexual desire or activity
- ▶ significant change in diet
- ▶ weight gain or loss
- ▶ inability to concentrate.

Some people increase alcohol, coffee or drug consumption after an event. Accidents are more frequent after intense stress. Pregnancies are more common after some crises.

Do your best to take care of yourself physically—illness frequently occurs when you are run down.

Staying healthy

Some simple steps to look after your health are:

- ▶ watch your diet and physical health
- ▶ do at least 30 minutes of exercise a day
- ▶ watch your coffee, cigarette, alcohol and drug intake.
- ▶ drive more carefully
- ▶ be safe at home and at work, don't take short cuts
- ▶ continue your normal medical treatment
- ▶ try not to work overly long hours.

If you're feeling stressed try:

- ▶ **slow and deep breathing**
- ▶ **tensing and relaxing your body**
- ▶ **stretching**
- ▶ **going for a walk**
- ▶ **listening to relaxing music.**



People who might need more help

Some people may find it more difficult to adjust to life after the event, and may require more support from their community.

- ▶ people who have been evacuated or separated from family and friends
- ▶ those who are more physically isolated
- ▶ those newly arrived to an area, including recent migrants or people from a refugee background
- ▶ people who are unwell, either prior to or as a result of the event
- ▶ people with a physical or intellectual disability living in the community with support
- ▶ people with significant financial losses
- ▶ people who have been injured or witnessed a traumatic event.

A crisis may be more intense for people who have suffered heavily or been particularly involved.

Bereaved

Bereavement can be especially difficult when deaths were multiple, sudden or violent, a child

or young person died, the body was not found, or when the relationship with the deceased person was difficult.

High profile events can also take on a community dimension, where the public also grieves for the deceased. This public grief often subsides quickly after public memorial services, leaving the directly affected people to cope within their own circle of family and friends.

Emergency workers, volunteers or helpers

The responsibility of helping out in an emergency can give people stronger reactions, especially those who gave deeply of themselves, came into close contact with the injured, dying or dead, felt they failed to do their job properly, or experienced 'burn-out'.

Elderly

Elderly people may find it harder to readjust because of reduced energy, increasing frailty and limitations on social and economic resources required to rebuild their lives.

Children

Children also experience emotional and physical responses to crises. Their imaginings and nightmares can add to their fear after an event. Sometimes children show their distress by behaving in ways they did when they were younger, such as clinging.

These behaviours may be a burden on already stressed parents, but be aware that children need the closeness and comfort of their families. They need to be understood, believed and given honest explanations of the event.

Children need reassurance about their own and their family's safety, and to know that they did not cause the event. It is important to make sure that children of all ages are not exposed to horrific images in the media, including on internet chat room sites. Be mindful of what they also might be exposed to listening to adult conversations and in the school yard. If you have concerns talk to your child's teacher or your GP.

Kids Helpline provides confidential anonymous counselling for young people aged five to 25:
1800 55 1800 or **kidshelp.com.au**

Constructive activities like drawing, playing and talking can help children to express their feelings.



Family and social relationships

Emergencies may put stress on existing relationships within the family and friendship circles. You might feel that your friends and family just can't understand; they weren't there. Common reactions to these feelings can include anger, conflict, jealousy and on rare occasions, violence. Some friendships won't prove to be as supportive as you expected; others may be surprisingly stronger. In some cases you may form new friendships and relationships, particularly with people with whom you shared the event.

Making it easier to cope

There are things you can do to make the events and feelings easier to bear:

Doing things

- ▶ do things that are active and useful (just be careful to avoid over-activity)

Facing reality

- ▶ face reality even if it is painful
- ▶ return the scene, inspect damage, visit the injured and in the case of the death of someone you love, view the body or attend the funeral talking
- ▶ talk about your experiences and how you feel, and make time to listen to others

Reducing exposure

- reduce your exposure to the television, internet, newspaper or radio

Receiving support

- ▶ be open to receiving support and comfort, spend time with family or friends

Making time

- ▶ make time and space to be alone with your thoughts and feelings

Exercising and resting

- ▶ exercise, and make time for rest and recreation to maintain your physical and mental health, and get enough sleep

Getting back into routine

- ▶ return to everyday routines and familiar activities as soon as possible—even in small ways.

Do's

- ▶ do allow yourself time to talk, be angry, cry, laugh and grieve according to your needs
- ▶ do allow your children to share in your distress and encourage them to express their own
- ▶ do allow yourself time to be with people who care about you and also with people who went through what you went through
- ▶ do spend time alone when you need it
- ▶ do recognise that everyone expresses things in their own way. Men may find it harder to express emotion and weep. Children may need encouragement and support to express themselves
- ▶ do take time out to sleep, rest, enjoy and do routine things when possible
- ▶ do allow your children to return to school and keep up with their activities as soon as they are ready
- ▶ do express your needs clearly and honestly to family, friends and officials.

Don'ts

- ▶ don't bottle up feelings
- ▶ don't avoid talking and thinking about what has happened.

Seeking support

Seeking support after a major personal crisis can be a positive step. Some people choose to seek informal help from family, friends, colleagues or through their faith.

Sometimes, however, informal support may not be enough. Consider seeking professional help if:

- ▶ your emotions or physical symptoms are too intense or persistent
- ▶ you feel too numb, cut off or you have to keep active in order not to feel
- ▶ you continue to have nightmares, poor sleep or flashbacks
- ▶ your family, social or work relationships suffer
- ▶ sexual problems develop
- ▶ you experience loss of memory and concentration
- ▶ your performance suffers at school, work or home
- ▶ you have accidents or illness
- ▶ you increase smoking, drinking or drug taking
- ▶ you have no one to talk to about your experience
- ▶ you have lost faith in yourself or the world
- ▶ you have feelings of hopelessness, despair or even suicide.

Consider professional assistance as preventative health care and get information and advice earlier rather than later. You can seek assistance from your general practitioner, community health service or an experienced registered psychologist.



How can I become a supporter?

Red Cross relies on committed volunteers, members and donors.

You can support Red Cross by:

1. *giving* monthly, leaving a bequest in your will or making a one-off donation to Disaster Relief and Recovery
2. *visiting* your local Red Cross store
3. *donating* blood

redcross.org.au or call 1800 811 700

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