



Disasters: Trauma and Coping

Wildfires, tornadoes, drought, and floods are natural disasters that can devastate lands, livelihoods, and lives. The physical traumas that are a part of natural disasters are often sudden, unexpected, require multiple agencies to respond, and can typically take years to overcome. The emotional and mental trauma resulting from disasters can be just as harmful.

So, how does one cope with disaster?

Disaster Related Trauma

The unexpectedness and devastation of a disaster can contribute to trauma. Trauma is an emotional response to highly stressful events that challenge and hinder the effectiveness of one's typical coping skills. Trauma affects everyone differently, and a traumatic event can be any incident perceived as traumatic to an individual. Though it is common that feelings of disbelief, shock, anxiety, grief, and guilt follow most disasters, many can cope and recover after a traumatic event. However, if uncomfortable feelings go unchecked and become a barrier to one's normal daily functioning for more than two weeks after the disaster, they could be suffering from post-traumatic stress. Unchecked post-traumatic stress can become Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is

a psychiatric disorder characterized by a specific combination of symptoms that can severely affect the daily functioning of an individual. PTSD symptoms may include:

- Flashbacks of the event
- Nightmares about the event
- Avoiding the event location
- Avoiding people or things closely associated with the event
- Feelings of constantly being on edge
- Difficulties sleeping
- Inability to remember parts or all of the event
- Decreased interest in once typically enjoyed activities

Listed symptoms can be typical for adults, but is not a complete list of all the signs/symptoms of PTSD. Only licensed mental health practitioners can diagnose PTSD.

Coping and Disaster Recovery

To build coping skills and move towards recovery, after a disaster:

Basic needs. Immediately following a traumatic event, make sure the basic needs (access to food,

clean water, and safe shelter) of you and your family are met.

Talk about it. Talking about what happened, your thoughts and feelings (fear, anger, joy, and sadness) can help you move forward from the event to thinking about your next steps.

Take time to grieve. Disasters can cause damage. It is important to reflect on what has been lost, so you can begin to heal and make plans for the future.

Spend time with loved ones. Being close to family, friends, pets, and other loved ones after a disaster can help relieve stress.

Positive thinking (within reason). Try to focus on positives after the disaster. Notice at least one positive thing, thought, or action each day. It is difficult to be optimistic following a disaster; however, even the smallest positive thought can build hope during difficult times.

Limit exposure to the event. Immediately following the disaster, it may be helpful to avoid news, social media, or other platforms that may discuss the event. Continued exposure to media coverage may cause negative feelings to reemerge.

Help others. Consider participating in community restoration efforts or other positive actions. Taking the time to help others, who may also be struggling, can help distract you from your own sadness.

Seek professional help. Trauma may lead to emotions, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that can be overwhelming or even dangerous. Reach out to local mental health professionals, trusted professionals, and reputable agencies for assistance now and into the future as memories of the disaster may resurface at unexpected times.

Remember, trauma can be linked to disasters, so it is not unusual for the anniversary of a disaster, news highlights, or certain times of the year to be difficult times for those who survived or experienced a disaster.

Children and Natural Disasters

Children who experience disasters may experience trauma differently than adults. It is important to check-in with children after a disaster has



occurred. Have them talk, role-play, or draw about what they are feeling. It can help them make sense of the disaster on a level that they can understand. Inviting (not forcing) children to express their thoughts and feelings about the disaster will help you understand how they are coping and how it is best to help them. Like adults, children can develop PTSD after a traumatic event. Young children may exhibit some loss of already mastered skills such as talking, start bed-wetting, loss of self-control, or increase acting out. Be alert to these signs and symptoms in children after a disaster.

Adults who are busy with their own recovery may not notice the quietness or self-imposed isolation of their child or the attempts that children make to cope or offer support to their parents. Be alert to older children who may take on parenting roles, which can keep them away from their own friendships and support circles. It is important that children of all ages return to their normal routines and activities when safety has been ensured. Contact a mental health professional, school counselor, or trusted medical professional in your area on behalf of the child if you observe concerning behaviors or emotions for more than two weeks.

Conclusion

By their very nature, disasters are devastating to individuals, families, and communities. After a disaster, it is important to take care of yourself, recover in your own time, and build resilience with healthy coping skills. There are resources that will help you rebuild and recover.

Resources

Responses to Wildfires:

Coping Emotionally After a Fire:

<https://surviving-wildfire.extension.org/coping-emotionally-after-a-wildfire/>

Coping With Emotional Trauma After Fire:

<https://www.frontlinewildfire.com/surviving-the-trauma-wildfires-emotional-toll/>

Trauma:

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd>

What is Trauma-Informed Care? <http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/social-research/institutes-centers/institute-on-trauma-and-trauma-informed-care/what-is-trauma-informed-care.html>

Disaster and Children:

Helping Children After a Wildfire: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/natural-disaster-resources/helping-children-after-a-wildfire-tips-for-parents-and-teachers>

Disasters: Children's Responses and Helping Them Recover <https://bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3196.pdf>

Disaster Distress Helpline (printable brochure): https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/library-archives/ddh-brochure.pdf?sfvrsn=fd0d442c_2

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