

Understanding and Coping with Trauma after a Natural Disaster

Life is fraught with difficult and scary situations. Still, sometimes these situations are beyond our control and overload our ability to deal with the disaster physically and psychologically. An unfortunate and frightening example of such a situation includes natural disasters. When natural disasters happen, they may leave us devastated. This devastation can consist of losing loved ones, friends, personal possessions, or critical parts of our community. The result of tragic events can leave us in shock and feeling hopeless and helpless. These feelings of shock and helplessness result from personal trauma because of the natural disaster we experienced. During the recovery from a natural disaster, we must recognize the warning signs of trauma in ourselves and those in our community. In doing so, we can begin to cope with the trauma and eventually grow stronger for ourselves, our family, friends, and our community.

Trauma Defined

Trauma is our body's response when we experience an event that is physically life-threatening or emotionally hurtful. When we experience trauma, it can leave lasting effects on our mental and physical well-being and produce warning signs that we may not immediately recognize. A simple way to think about trauma is to consider the maximum amount of stress you can handle in response to an uncontrollable event. In many cases, the event disrupts our ability to cope because of the significant loss of relationships and things necessary to meet our basic needs.

Signs of Trauma

When we experience trauma, it is helpful to remember that we are under extreme stress. Because of the trauma and stress, our brain puts us into survival mode (fight-flight), which helps keep us alive but can impair our ability to recognize the signs of trauma and recover. Most people experience powerful emotional and physical responses immediately after the traumatic event, and in many cases, for months afterward. Some signs of trauma include:

- Feeling angry, irritable, or bitter
- Problems focusing or feeling confused
- Socially isolating from family or friends
- Avoiding places that bring back painful memories of the event.
- Easily startled or scared
- Sadness
- Intense grief for weeks and months
- Recurrent thoughts about the disaster
- Difficulty sleeping or having nightmares about the disaster
- Headaches and/or fatigue
- Heart racing when thinking about the event
- Worrying more or fearful about future disasters
- Digestive problems, like upset stomach.

Coping with Trauma

Coping with trauma can sound difficult when trying to recover from a natural disaster, especially if we feel helpless or hopeless. Several tips below can help you, your friends, family, and the community handle trauma and the stress brought on by the natural disaster. As you consider following the tips below, remember that recovery is possible!

Tip No. 1: Prioritize Basic Needs

- **Food:** undamaged, nonperishable or food provided during relief efforts.
- **Safety:** avoid running water, damaged structures, or downed power lines. Minimize exposure to flood waters. Avoid going out after curfew or at night to prevent exposure to hazards like downed power lines.
- **Water:** bottled water or other prepackaged juices or sodas.
- **Clothing:** if possible, obtain or keep a set of dry clothes, including socks and a jacket or coat.
- **Shelter:** take shelter in an undamaged/unaffected structure like a school, church, or mobile shelter.

Tip No. 2: Care for Others, Care for Yourself

- Use compassion and caring dealing with others.
- Offer supportive words to yourself and others.
- Spend time or reach out to family and friends daily.
- Avoid the use of alcohol or drugs.
- Reduce/avoid consumption of news.
- Delay making major life decisions.
- Acknowledge your emotions; one day, you may feel angry, then feel overwhelmed or sad.
- Give yourself grace. Feeling sad, worried, and angry is OK.
- Try to get “good” sleep.
- Remain flexible. Changes will occur.
- Seek professional support from a physician or counselor.

Tip No. 3: Restore Your Routine

- Eat at the same time each day.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Take time for rest to boost your recovery.
- If possible, take your medicines.
- Take time to grieve.
- Call, text, or talk to someone you trust daily. Talk with volunteer or safety personnel if you cannot connect with a friend or family member.
- Once out of danger and you are safe, wake up and go to bed each day at the same times.



Source: Paul E. Norrod, DrPH, RN

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