



Public Health
Agency of Canada

Agence de santé
publique du Canada

Responding to Stressful Events



**Taking Care of
Ourselves,
Our Families and
Our Communities**

Canada 

Responding to Stressful Events: Taking Care of Ourselves, Our Families and Our Communities

Natural or human-caused disasters such as earthquakes, health emergencies, terrorist attacks or acts of war challenge our coping skills, even if we only witness them on television. If they touch our lives more closely (for example, if they occur near where we live, or affect people we know) they can cause a lot of distress, fear and anxiety. We worry about our own safety, the safety of our loved ones and our community.

Events of this kind can also stir up memories and feelings about violent or painful events that we may have experienced in the past: the death of a family member or friend in an accident; a serious illness or injury; the loss of a job; family violence or sexual assault. And of course, the stress of a large-scale disaster can make any stressful circumstances we are currently facing more difficult to handle.

It is important to be aware that stressful feelings are normal when our lives are touched by catastrophic events, and that there are steps we can take to feel better.

Things to Keep in Mind

It is important to know that:

- People of all ages are strong and resilient, and most recover within a short period of time.
- You have knowledge and experience that can help your family and your community cope with the stresses triggered by catastrophic events.
- Reassuring people about their safety and explaining what measures are being taken to protect them is an important step in helping them cope.
- Parents', caregivers' and community leaders' own responses to an event strongly influences children's and community members' ability to recover.

The basic information provided below will help you help others.

Feelings and Reactions to Stressful Events

In the wake of stressful events such as a disaster or terrorist attack our reactions can:

Affect us physically: We may have headaches, back pain, stomach aches, diarrhea, problems with sleeping, tightness in neck and shoulders, low energy or general tiredness, loss of appetite or tendency to eat more “comfort foods” or use more alcohol, drugs and tobacco.

Affect us emotionally: We may feel sad, angry, guilty, helpless, numb, confused, discouraged, worried and anxious about the future, and afraid that a similar event may reoccur. Feelings can come and go like the tides, building up then fading away, only to come back and fade away again. They can also come out of the blue when we least expect it.

Affect our thinking: It may be hard to concentrate, to stop thinking about the events, hard to remember day-to-day things. Memories of other sad or difficult events from the past may surface. Thoughts, like feelings, can also come out of the blue, while reading, talking, having a meeting, driving, etc.

Affect our sense of safety: We may find it hard to leave home or loved ones; we may tend to overprotect our children; or, we may be nervous about travelling by plane.

These reactions are normal in situations of stress

Most of us have had some of these reactions. Some of us may feel them more strongly or more often than others but it is reassuring to know that these are common reactions when people experience a very stressful event. In other words, you are not alone.

Stressful events, even major crises, are part of life. In most cases, our life experience has given

us the strengths and skills we need to gradually work through our feelings and reactions. Friends and family can help. Here are some healthy ways of looking after both ourselves and one another:

Taking care of ourselves

- Take breaks from the media reports and from thinking and talking about the events.
- Take time to relax and exercise. This will help decrease stress and tension and help you be more alert, sleep and eat better, and get back on track.
- Talk with friends, relatives, co-workers, teachers or leaders of your faith community. Talk about your thoughts, feelings and reactions. Comfort one another. Talking with others can make you feel less alone and help you sort out reactions to the events. Remember to talk about the normal issues and pleasures of your life as well - don't let disaster take over every conversation.
- Some may be quite affected by these events, others less. Patience and understanding with one another are two of the best ways to help.
- Be careful about making major decisions if you are very upset.
- Get back to your daily routine. Do things you enjoy to help restore a sense of safety and control.
- Watch what you eat. Eat healthy foods.
- Be physically active, doing something you enjoy.
- Don't use alcohol to numb your feelings. This can set up an unhealthy pattern and can lead to more serious problems down the road.
- Get a good night's sleep.

Taking care of our families

- Reassure family members who may be worried about their safety and about the future.
- Take time to talk about the events. Relax together. For example, go to a movie or

for a meal. Remember, taking time out is not a cop-out.

- Everybody needs to be heard and understood.
- Visit with relatives and friends.

Taking care of children and teenagers

Children and teenagers will need our help. Other pamphlets in this series “**Helping Children Cope**” and “**Helping Teens Cope**” offer some helpful hints on what to expect and what to do for children and youth.

Taking care of older relatives

Today’s seniors are an independent, resourceful group who have weathered many storms. Catastrophic events may trigger memories of previous painful experiences. Some seniors may be concerned about their safety and about the future. Others may feel sad, confused and disorganized for a while. Coping may be more difficult for seniors suffering from depression, thinking and memory problems, those living alone or those with few social supports.

You can help by:

- Visiting older people: parents, friends, relatives, neighbours.
- Talking with them about their thoughts, feelings and reactions.
- Including them in social and recreational activities.
- Reassuring them that you are available should they want to talk or need help.

Taking care of our communities

- Take part in information meetings about the events.
- Attend memorials, candlelight vigils.
- Attend inter-religious events.
- In the case of terrorism or war, don’t let racism poison your community. When people are afraid or angry, they often want to blame and punish someone.

- Help any group you are part of to be fair, accepting and understanding.

Delayed reactions

Some of us react strongly at the time stressful events happen. Others react later, after a few days or even a few weeks. Delayed reactions can be confusing. Remember, not everyone reacts the same way. Following the tips on self-care given above will help you deal with delayed reactions.

When to Seek Help

The information offered in this brochure is a reference point to help you to understand some of the stress reactions you or other family members or friends may experience. If, at any time, you feel overwhelmed and unable to cope it is important to seek out additional assistance. Here are some circumstances which indicate that it is time to get help by speaking to a health professional such as a psychologist, family doctor, psychiatrist, social worker or nurse:

- Can't return to a normal routine
- Feeling extremely helpless
- Having thoughts of hurting self or others
- Using alcohol and drugs excessively

Resources in your community which may be available for help

- Distress or crisis centres
- Local hospital
- Family service agency
- Bereavement group
- Leader of your faith community
- Family and friends you can call to talk things over

Acknowledgments

This document was revised by the Mental Health Support Network of Canada, a network of professional and voluntary associations concerned about mental health and the stress arising from extreme stressors.

Much of the information in this document was developed following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States using information put together by Health Canada with input from the Canadian Medical Association, Canadian Psychological Association, Canadian Psychiatric Association and the Canadian Public Health Association.

Mental Health Support Network of Canada, Members:

- Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists
- Canadian Association of Social Workers
- Canadian Healthcare Association
- Canadian Medical Association
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- Canadian Nurses Association
- Canadian Paediatric Society
- Canadian Pharmacists Association
- Canadian Psychiatric Association
- Canadian Psychological Association
- Canadian Public Health Association
- Canadian Red Cross
- The College of Family Physicians of Canada
- Public Health Agency of Canada

February 2005

This pamphlet has been published by the Public Health Agency of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0K9.

It can be reproduced freely for non-profit educational purposes or as part of a public awareness initiative, provided that full acknowledgment of the source is made. For more information about the psychosocial dimension of emergency preparedness, see the Personal Services manual at:
http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/emergency-urgence/index_e.html.

Coping resources in your community

Please use this space to list the names and telephone numbers of key resources and programs in your community (including friends and family you can call to talk things over).
