

Coping Tips for Traumatic Events and Disasters

Body

Emotional distress can happen before and after a disaster. Coping strategies include preparation, self-care, and identifying support systems. People can experience a wide range of emotions before and after a disaster or traumatic event. There's no right or wrong way to feel. However, it's important to find healthy ways to cope when these events happen.

Take Care of Yourself and Your Loved Ones

- **Take care of yourself.** Try to eat healthy, avoid using alcohol and drugs, and get some exercise when you can—even a walk around the block and deep breathing can make a difference to relieve stress.
- **Reach out to friends and family.** Talk to someone you trust about how you are doing.
- If you have children, talk to them. They may feel scared, angry, sad, worried, and confused. Let them know it's okay to talk about what's on their mind. Role model healthy coping.
- **Limit your consumption of news.** We live in a society where the news is available to us 24 hours a day via television, radio, and the Internet. The constant replay of news stories about a disaster or traumatic event can increase stress and anxiety and make some people relive the event over and over. Reduce the amount of news you watch and/or listen to.
- **Get enough “good” sleep.** Some people have difficulty falling asleep after a disaster or wake up throughout the night. If you have trouble sleeping, only go to bed when you are ready to sleep, avoid using cell phones or laptops in bed, and avoid drinking caffeine or alcohol at least one hour before going to bed. If you wake up and can't fall back to sleep, try writing what's on your mind in a journal or on a sheet of paper.
- **Establish and maintain a routine.** Try to eat meals at regular times and put yourself on a sleep schedule to ensure an adequate amount of rest. Include a positive or fun activity in your schedule that you can look forward to each day or week.

- **Avoid making major life decisions.** Doing things like switching jobs or careers can already be stressful and are even harder to adjust to directly after a disaster.
- **Understand there will be changes.** Disasters can destroy homes, schools, and places of business and worship and can disrupt the lives of people living in affected areas for a long time. Sometimes, people lose loved ones or experience injuries, both physical and mental, that may last a lifetime. Some people may also experience a temporary or permanent loss of employment. For children, attending a new or temporary school may result in being separated from peers, or after-school activities may be disrupted.
- **Take care of pets or get outside into nature when it's safe.** Nature and animals can help us to feel better when we are down. See if you can volunteer at a local animal shelter—they may need help after a disaster. Once it's safe to return to public parks or natural areas, find a quiet spot to sit in or go for a hike.
- **Know when to ask for help.** Signs of stress can be normal, short-term reactions to any of life's unexpected events—not only after surviving a disaster, but also after a death in the family, the loss of a job, or a breakup. It's important to pay attention to what's going on with you or with someone you care about, because what may seem like “everyday stress” can actually be: depression (including the thoughts of suicide), anxiety, or alcohol/drug abuse.

Ask for Help

[Warning signs](#) of stress are normal, short-term reactions to life's unexpected challenges. However, it is important to recognize when you or others experience emotional distress that is persistent and becomes difficult to manage.

- **Find a local support group.** In a group setting led by trained and experienced professionals, people who have shared a similar experience can exchange thoughts, feelings, and ideas on how to get through difficult times. Support groups provide a safe place for people to find comfort in knowing they are not alone.
- **Reach out to family and friends.** Talking to someone you trust about your feelings without fear of judgment may offer some relief. Family and friends can be a great resource for support. Your family and friends may have also survived the disaster and understand the emotions you are experiencing. It's also a good idea to speak with friends who were not involved, because they can be objective and provide additional support.

- **Speak with a financial adviser.** The loss of a home or job or being unable to work after a disaster can be an overwhelming financial burden people feel they have to struggle with alone. Financial advisers don't immediately come to mind as a resource after a disaster, but they should be among the first people you call when developing a strategy to rebuild your life. Seeking help from a financial adviser can ease the stress and point you in the direction of other helpful resources or programs tailored to your situation.

If you or your loved ones continue to have feelings of anxiety, fear, and anger for two weeks or more, with no improvement, it's best to seek professional help. Call or text the [Disaster Distress Helpline](#) to locate services and speak with trained crisis counselors who are ready to assist you.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/coping-tips>