



Your Leading Mental Health Resource

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Disaster and Your Mental Health: What is a Normal Response, and When to Seek Help

After a disaster people may experience many powerful emotions. For most people, the intense feelings of anxiety, sadness, grief and anger have been healthy and appropriate. These feelings usually lessen over time and impact daily life less and less.

But some people may have a more profound and debilitating reaction to the disaster. Knowing what is a normal response to an abnormal situation, and what signs might indicate you have a more serious problem, will help you determine if and when to seek help from a mental health professional.

Common Responses

It is 'normal' to have difficulty managing your feelings after major disaster events. Many people will experience some common symptoms in the days and weeks following such an event, such as:

- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation; difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Inability to focus
- Apathy and emotional numbing
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness and depression
- Feeling powerless
- Extreme changes in eating patterns; loss of appetite or overeating
- Crying for "no apparent reason"
- Headaches and stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Excessive use of alcohol and drugs

It is important to remember that everyone reacts differently to disaster and each person has their own tolerance level for difficult feelings. To cope with these emotions, there are some things you can do for yourself and others. Experts say that remaining engaged in our world, staying connected with people, and being optimistic about the challenges ahead are key to riding through otherwise traumatic times. In fact, in times of turmoil, people can make changes that improve their lives and life satisfaction.

Signs to Seek Help

However, when feelings do not go away or are so intense that they impair your ability to function in daily life, you may have a diagnosable disorder that requires mental healthcare. There are signs that can help you determine whether you are having a normal reaction to our nation's crisis or if you're experiencing a mental health problem. These signs include:

- Nightmares and reoccurring thoughts about the event
- Being unable to stop thinking about what happened
- Avoiding thoughts, feelings or conversations that remind you of the event
- Avoiding places or people that remind you of the event
- Having a sense of a foreshortened future
- Continued difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Feeling jumpy or easily startled
- Being overly concerned about safety
- Feeling guilty, worthless or hopeless
- Not taking pleasure in activities once enjoyed
- Having thoughts of death or suicide

If you are experiencing these symptoms, talking with a mental health professional or taking a mental health screening test can help you understand how well you are coping with the recent events. Take that step and get help.

For supportive listening services, call the Montgomery County Hotline at (301) 738-2255.

For immediate response to crisis situations, call the Montgomery County Crisis Center at (240) 777-4000.

For general information or related fact sheets, call the Mental Health Association at (301) 424-0656 or visit www.mhamc.org.