

STRESS IN ADULTS AFTER A DISASTER: WARNING SIGNS AND MANAGEMENT

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A disaster can be stressful for many people and can lead to mental and emotional disruption. In the moment, stress may be “good,” in that it helps people focus, respond, and react to what is going on around them. Although, prolonged stress after a disaster—commonly referred to as post-disaster stress—is bad for human physical, mental, and emotional health.

An adult’s emotional reactions after a trauma can vary greatly, ranging from minimal distress to extreme stress reactions. Although a person’s reaction to post-disaster stress may be troubling, remember: These are normal reactions to abnormal situations.

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

The following are potential symptoms people may encounter in their interactions with adults after a disaster or terrorism event:

Erratic behavior – Some people may engage in risky behaviors, or even criminal activity to try to solve problems or deal with other matters. Anger may be common, too.

Changes in mood – After a disaster, many people feel nervous, anxious, and depressed. They also may experience a range of other emotions, including irritability and rapid mood swings. This behavior often results in outbursts toward family, friends and co-workers. Feelings of guilt also are possible—especially if a person lost a loved one in the disaster. Some people may wish they had done things differently, taken the place of their loved one, or been there with that person during the crisis.

Increased substance abuse – In stressful situations, some adults abuse alcohol or other substances. Such behavior may lead to further problems at home and at work.

Physical symptoms – Adults who report physical symptoms, such as headaches, fatigue, and pain may request more sick leave from work. Some of these symptoms may be related to increased anxiety. High levels of stress can weaken the immune system, leading to increases in illness.

Recurrent thoughts – Adults may think about the disaster constantly and find it difficult to think about anything else. Dreams and daydreams about the event are also common. Some people may have flashbacks of the event or feel that they are reliving it. Recurrent thoughts or flashbacks can interfere with concentration and work performance.

Avoidance – Adults may want to avoid places or things that remind them of the event. Such reminders bring back the strong emotions they experienced during the disaster. Depending on the nature of the disaster, victims have commonly avoided airplanes, bodies of water, cars, and tall buildings.

Shaken belief systems – After a disaster, adults may question their religious or spiritual beliefs. They also may question their assumptions about the safety of their community or country—as a result of a toxic waste disaster, for example. Others may question their trust in government officials, especially if there is some concern that early information may have been intentionally withheld from the public. Such questioning and soul-searching is common after a disaster, as people search for meaning and resolution.

Strained relationships – Adults may withdraw from their families or friends when they feel distressed. Many victims describe their self-isolation as a product of feeling helpless and without energy, while other people indicate that they simply want to avoid troubling others with the burden of their distress. Some victims avoid leaving home for fear that something terrible will happen again, or they may feel shame over their emotional reactions. There also are those who may not want to leave their family members alone so they can protect them from another possible disaster. Stress on

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a marriage is another warning sign, and it may increase because of disaster-related stressors.

Cognitive problems – People may have difficulty concentrating, paying attention, and remembering things. Concentration and focus may be impaired by fatigue, recurrent thoughts of the disaster, and even worry about the future.

Impaired work performance – It is common for work performance and productivity to drop after a disaster. Occupational achievement may seem less important after a tragedy. Relationships and work performance may suffer because of impaired concentration, memory, and attention, along with increased irritability and mood swings.

Changes in sleeping, eating, and daily routines – People commonly have trouble sleeping, and adults might have nightmares about the disaster. They might also experience daydreams that make them feel like they are reliving the event. Dramatic changes in appetite—especially a drop in appetite—are common.

MANAGING STRESS

Practicing good stress management after a disaster can lessen feelings of distress. The following are actions that can help people relieve stress:

Take care of yourself – This approach will help people cope with the stressors after a disaster. Eat healthful foods, get plenty of rest, take some time to relax each day and know personal limits. People also may find it helpful to learn relaxation techniques, meditation, or yoga. Many people want to help their families and friends after a disaster. However, people experiencing disaster-related stressors will be less helpful to others if they are tired and stressed.

Seek support – Reaching out to others allows people to talk with someone about their experience. Seek out trusted individuals, and spend time with family and friends. When seeking support, remember: Those close people also may be distressed about the disaster and need to talk. Because of this, some of them may be unable to provide the help needed. If this is the case, seek out other sources of support.

Maintain routines – If possible, stick with a normal routine. This can help provide a sense of normalcy, as well as help a person maintain their usual social contacts at school, work, or other places usually visited every day. Following a regular routine can also help a person take their mind off the disaster—even if just for a little while. If regular activities cannot be attended because of the disaster, try to maintain as many home

routines as possible (e.g., meals and family time) and work on enjoyable hobbies or other activities.

Engage in physical activity – Physical activity can be an excellent stress reliever for many people. Walking, jogging, or playing a sport like basketball can help. Some people may prefer cleaning the garage or working in the yard. This will not only help manage stress, but also ease pressure from the problems that the disaster created.

Limit exposure to news coverage of the event – After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, some people found that watching too much media coverage of the event increased their feelings of distress. It is normal to want to stay updated on the events surrounding a disaster. However, feelings of distress may be able to be reduced by limiting the amount of time spent watching or listening to media coverage of an event.

Seek trusted sources of information – During any disaster, seek accurate sources of information. This is especially true for events involving chemicals or biological agents. Information may come from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), local government officials, or from a family doctor. For the most accurate information, search websites maintained by local, state, or federal governmental agencies. Educating oneself may make someone feel like they have some control over the situation. However, as is the case with media exposure, it can be stressful for some people spending too much time seeking information.

Avoid using drugs and alcohol – Avoid using drugs or alcohol to cope with stress. Such substances only provide a temporary “numbing” of feelings from distress and can lead to additional problems. Using substances as a coping mechanism can cause difficulties (e.g., in family relationships, job performance, and recovery from the disaster).

Consider participating in recovery efforts – Helping others can be a great source of stress relief for some people. People can help by volunteering in recovery efforts, such as cleaning up debris, delivering food to families, or raising disaster recovery funds. Another way to participate is to provide support by listening to other people's disaster experiences. However, to avoid feeling “burned out” from being too involved, it is important to recognize personal limits. Seek adequate personal time and support while also helping others. If participating in recovery efforts increases personal stress, do not be afraid to decrease activity levels.

Be understanding of yourself and others — Remember: It is normal for people to be more distressed in the initial period after a disaster. People that recently experienced a disaster may need to

be more patient than usual with co-workers, family members, or children. Give them opportunities to talk about their experiences and encourage them to take extra time for themselves. It is also important to understand that it may personally take longer than others to recover from the disaster. If feeling strained, try to avoid taking on extra responsibilities. Disaster recovery is an individual process.

Seek extra help – Some people may benefit from getting additional help if they still feel upset for more than a month after a disaster. This is particularly important if stress seems to interfere with daily activities (e.g., work, school, or family responsibilities). Help is available from many sources: a pastor or a clergy member, a mental health professional, a community mental health center, or a personal doctor. All of

these people can make references to an appropriate source of help. In addition to family and friends, other sources of help might include support groups at work or in the community. Because most disasters are big events that significantly impact many people, coming together is an important part of rebuilding a community. Remember: Seeking personal self-help and support first is imperative to be able to help and support others.

FOR HELP, CONTACT:

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Disaster Distress Hotline:
1-800-985-5990; or: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>.

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