

## **PART FOUR:** **DISASTER REACTIONS & STRESS MANAGEMENT**

**Understanding stress and how it can affect us as well as our children is an essential part of being prepared to cope effectively with the impact that disasters often bring into our lives.**

Natural disasters such as tornados, or man-made tragedies such as bombings, can leave children feeling frightened, confused, and insecure.

Whether a child has personally experienced trauma or has merely seen the event on television or heard it discussed by adults, **it is important for parents and teachers to be informed and ready to help if reactions to stress begin to occur.**

**Children respond to trauma in many different ways.** Some may have reactions very soon after the event; others may seem to be doing fine for weeks or months, and then begin to show worrisome behaviors.

### **Preschool Age**

**Children from one to five years in age** find it particularly hard to adjust to change and loss. In addition, these youngsters have not yet developed their own coping skills, so they must depend on parents, family members, and teachers to help them through difficult times.

**Very young children may regress to an earlier behavioral stage after a traumatic event.** For example, preschoolers may resume thumb sucking or bedwetting or may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, or “monsters.” They may cling to a parent or teacher or become very attached to a place where they feel safe.

**Changes in eating and sleeping habits are common, as are unexplainable aches and pains.** Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and aggressive or withdrawn behavior. Preschoolers may tell exaggerated stories about the traumatic event or may speak of it over and over.

### **Early Childhood**

**Children aged five to eleven** may have some of the same reactions as younger boys and girls. In addition, they may withdraw from play groups and friends, compete more for the attention of parents, fear going to school, allow school performance to drop, become aggressive, or find it hard to concentrate. These children may also return to “more childish” behaviors; for example, they may ask to be fed or dressed.

### **Adolescence**

**Children twelve to fourteen** are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress and may abandon chores, school work, and other responsibilities they previously handled. While on the one hand they may compete vigorously for attention from parents and teachers, they may also withdraw, resist authority, become disruptive at home or in the classroom, or even begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors such as drinking or drug abuse. These young people are at a developmental stage in which the opinions of others are very important. They need to be thought of as “normal” by their friends and are less concerned about relating well with adults or participating in recreation or family activities they once enjoyed.

**In later adolescence**, teens may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities as the community responds to the disaster. **Older teens** may also deny the extent of their emotional reactions to the traumatic event.

### How to Help

**Reassurance is the key** to helping children through a traumatic time. Very young children need a lot of cuddling, as well as verbal support. Answer questions about the disaster honestly, but don't dwell on frightening details or allow the subject to dominate family or classroom time indefinitely.

**Try to maintain a normal household or classroom routine and encourage children to participate in recreational activity.** Reduce your expectations temporarily about performance in school or at home, perhaps by substituting less demanding responsibilities for normal chores.

The *Caring for Every Child's Mental Health Campaign* offers these pointers for parents and other caregivers:

- **Encourage children to ask questions.** Listen to what they say. Provide comfort and assurance that address their specific fears. It's okay to admit you can't answer all of their questions.
- **Talk on their level.** Communicate with your children in a way they can understand. Don't get too technical or complicated.
- **Be honest.** Tell them exactly what has happened. For example, don't say that someone who has died has "gone to sleep;" children may become afraid of going to bed.
- **Find out what frightens them.** Encourage your children to talk about fears they may have. They may worry that someone will harm them at school or that someone will try to hurt you.
- **Focus on the positive.** Reinforce the fact that most people are kind and caring. Remind your child of the heroic actions taken by ordinary people to help victims of tragedy.
- **Pay attention.** Your children's play and drawings may give you a glimpse into their questions or concerns. Ask them to tell you what is going on in the game or the picture. It's an opportunity to clarify any misconceptions, answer questions and give reassurance.
- **Develop a plan.** Establish a family emergency plan for the future, such as a meeting place where everyone should gather if something unexpected happens in your family or neighborhood. It can help you and your child feel safer.

**If you are concerned about your child's reaction to stress or trauma, call your physician or a community mental health center.**

**To learn more about children's mental health:**

**Call toll-free: 1.800.789.2647**

**(TDD): 301.443.9006**

**Web site:** [www.mentalhealth.samsha.gov/child](http://www.mentalhealth.samsha.gov/child)

Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services

for Children and Their Families Program

Child, Adolescent and Family Branch

Center for Mental Health Services

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

**Finally, acknowledge that you, too, may have reactions associated with the traumatic**

**event, and take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing.**

### **Anniversary Reactions to a Traumatic Event: The Recovery Process Continues**

As the anniversary of a disaster or traumatic event approaches, many survivors report a return of restlessness and fear. Psychological literature calls it the **anniversary reaction** and defines it as an individual's response to unresolved grief resulting from significant losses. **The anniversary reaction can involve several days or even weeks of anxiety, anger, nightmares, flashbacks, depression, or fear.**

On a more positive note, the **anniversary of a disaster or traumatic event also can provide an opportunity for emotional healing.** Individuals can make significant progress in working through the natural grieving process by recognizing, acknowledging, and paying attention to the feelings and issues that surface during their anniversary reaction. These feelings and issues can help individuals develop perspective on the event and figure out where it fits in their hearts, minds, and lives.

It is important to note that **not all** survivors of a disaster or traumatic event experience an anniversary reaction. Those who do, however, may be troubled because they did not expect and do not understand their reaction. For these individuals, knowing what to expect in advance may be helpful. **Common anniversary reactions among survivors of a disaster or traumatic event include:**

- **Memories, Dreams, Thoughts, and Feelings:** Individuals may replay memories, thoughts, and feelings about the event, which they can't turn off. They may see repeated images and scenes associated with the trauma or relive the event over and over. They may have recurring dreams or nightmares. These reactions may be as vivid on the anniversary as they were at the actual time of the disaster or traumatic event.
- **Grief and Sadness:** Individuals may experience grief and sadness related to the loss of income, employment, a home, or a loved one. Even people who have moved to new homes often feel a sense of loss on the anniversary. Those who were forced to relocate to another community may experience intense homesickness for their old neighborhoods.
- **Fear and Anxiety:** Fear and anxiety may resurface around the time of the anniversary, leading to jumpiness, startled responses, and vigilance about safety. These feelings may be particularly strong for individuals who are still working through the grieving process.
- **Frustration, Anger, and Guilt:** The anniversary may reawaken frustration and anger about the disaster or traumatic event. Survivors may be reminded of the possessions, homes, or loved ones they lost; the time taken away from their lives; the frustrations with bureaucratic aspects of the recovery process; and the slow process of rebuilding and healing. Individuals may also experience guilt about survival. These feelings may be particularly strong for individuals who are not fully recovered financially and emotionally.
- **Avoidance:** Some survivors try to protect themselves from experiencing an anniversary reaction by avoiding reminders of the event and attempting to treat the anniversary as just an ordinary day. Even for these people, it can be helpful to learn about common reactions that they or their loved ones may encounter, so they are not surprised if reactions occur.
- **Remembrance:** Many survivors welcome the cleansing tears, commemoration, and fellowship that the anniversary of the event offers. They see it as a time to honor the memory of what they have lost. They might light a candle, share favorite memories and stories, or attend a worship service.
- **Reflection:** The reflection brought about by the anniversary of a disaster or traumatic event is often a turning point in the recovery process. It is an opportunity for people to look back over the past year, recognize how far they have come, and give themselves credit for the challenges they surmounted. It is a time for survivors to look inward and to

recognize and appreciate the courage, stamina, endurance, and resourcefulness that they and their loved ones showed during the recovery process. It is a time for people to look around and pause to appreciate the family members, friends, and others who supported them through the healing process. It is also a time when most people can look forward with a renewed sense of hope and purpose.

Although these thoughts, feelings, and reactions can be very upsetting, it helps to understand that it is **normal to have strong reactions to a disaster or traumatic event and its devastation many months later**. Recovery from a disaster or traumatic event takes time, and it requires rebuilding on many levels - physically, emotionally, and spiritually. However, with patience, understanding, and support from family members and friends, **you can emerge from a disaster or traumatic event stronger than before**.

**If you are still having trouble coping, ask for help. Consult a counselor or mental health professional. In the workplace, you may be able to get assistance from your human resources department or your company's Employee Assistance Program.**

### **Things to Remember When Trying to Understand Disaster Events**

- No one who sees a disaster is untouched by it.
- It is normal to feel anxious about you and your family's safety.
- Profound sadness, grief, and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Acknowledging our feelings helps us recover.
- Focusing on our strengths and abilities will help you to heal.
- Accepting help from community programs and resources is healthy.
- We each have different needs and different ways of coping.
- It is common to want to strike back at people who have caused great pain. However, nothing good is accomplished by hateful language or actions.

### **Signs that Adults Need Stress Management Assistance**

- Difficulty communicating thoughts
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty maintaining balance
- Easily frustrated
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol
- Limited attention span
- Poor work performance
- Headaches/stomach problems
- Tunnel vision/muffled hearing
- Colds or flu-like symptoms.
- Disorientation or confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Reluctance to leave home
- Depression, sadness
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Mood-swings
- Crying easily
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt
- Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone

### **Ways to Ease the Stress**

- Talk with someone about your feelings anger, sorrow, and other emotions-- even though it may be difficult.
- Don't hold yourself responsible for the disastrous event or be frustrated because you feel that you cannot help directly in the rescue work.
- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing by staying active in your daily life patterns or by adjusting them. This healthy outlook will help yourself and your family. (i.e. healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation, meditation.)
- Maintain a normal household and daily routine, limiting demanding responsibilities of yourself and your family.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Participate in memorials, rituals, and use of symbols as a way to express feelings.
- Use existing supports groups of family, friends, and church.
- Establish a family emergency plan. Feeling that there is something that you can do is very comforting.

### **When to Seek Help:**

- ***If self help strategies are not helping or you find that you are using drugs/alcohol in order to cope, you may wish to seek outside or professional assistance with your stress symptoms.***

## **Managing the Stress in Your Life**

### **Goals of Stress Management**

**Management of day-to-day stress (as well as high intensity stressors such as natural disasters) requires attention to three important areas of your life: selfcare, realistic expectations of self and others, and the ability to prioritize.** While your ability to maintain your usual level of functioning will decline when under high levels of stress, developing good habits during less stressful periods will go a long way towards helping you to cope during peak times.

**The goal of stress management is to provide your body with periods of time to recover from the effects of the chemicals that flow through your blood vessels when you are under stress.** Without this rest, your body will remain in a state of heightened arousal and you will eventually display some combination of the **following symptoms:**

**Physical Signs** - Exhaustion, loss of energy, gastrointestinal upsets, hypochondriac complaints, increase or decrease in appetite, sleep disturbances, tremors, rashes, headaches, changes in heart rate and blood pressure, chest pain.

**Behavioral Signs** - Excessive fatigue, difficulties in expressing yourself verbally or in writing, hyperactivity.

**Emotional Signs** - Depression, irritability, anxiety, easily over-react emotionally to benign situations, excessive rage reactions, isolation

**Cognitive Signs** - Mental confusion or slowing of thought, inability to make decisions, inability to prioritize tasks, loss of ability to evaluate your own level of functioning, decreased math skills, decreased memory and attention span.

### **Self-Care:**

Self-Care includes maintaining a healthy diet, eating regular meals, getting enough sleep, exercising, recreation, practicing good hygiene, and avoiding the use of alcohol and other drugs to either relax or keep going (including monitoring your caffeine intake which can exacerbate your level of stress). In addition, the following can be helpful:

- Journaling
- Meditation, Guided Relaxation tapes
- Taking vacations -- even a short weekend trip away from it all
- Taking regular breaks at work (away from stressful situations)
- Sports activities -- as participant or spectator
- Exploring nature
- Talking with a friend, family member, co-worker or therapist
- Trying something you've always wanted to but haven't
- Doing something you use to enjoy, but stopped doing
- Be creative.

### **Setting Realistic Expectations of Self and Others:**

This skill is extremely important and requires developing an understanding of yours and others' limitations while keeping the stress management needs of all in mind. Maintaining unrealistic expectations leads to unnecessary self-recriminations and resentments toward others. Actively lowering your expectations (to a more reasonable level given the situation) may be difficult at first, but the rewards will be noticeable in the lessening of your stress level and friction/conflicts with others.

### **Prioritizing:**

During stressful times, our ability to think clearly diminishes and along with it goes our ability to prioritize. However, if you develop your skill in setting priorities during periods of less stress, it will become second nature too you and this will help when you are overwhelmed. This skill also builds on and depends on your ability to set realistic goals.

**WRITE YOUR STRESS MANAGEMENT PLAN HERE:**

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