

Things Families Can Do to Cope with Disaster

When a national disaster happens, it is common and normal to have unsettling feelings, thoughts and behaviors. Below are some ideas for ways to cope...

- Try to keep calm, because that will help you think more clearly and be more helpful to those around you, especially children. Don't panic or react to rumors. Check out the facts on TV or radio.
- Reassure young children that they are safe. Answer questions honestly if asked, do not volunteer a lot of information.
- Keep young children (under 8 years old) away from graphic images of violence.
- For younger children, try to keep to normal family routines, like bedtime stories or regular dinner times, as much as possible.
- Give older children and teens opportunities to express reactions to the disaster, by encouraging them to talk about how they are feeling, why they think these acts happened, what they think should be done. Answer questions in simple, honest ways. Avoid speculating beyond facts to more frightening implications. Acknowledge feelings of anger or desire for retribution but do not encourage them; expressing a lot of anger tends to make people more angry and upset.
- Be aware of the sources of distress.
 - One is the images experienced or and what you imagine the experience of victims to have been. Monitor exposure to graphic images. Distraction works for some; talking works for others.
 - The other is thinking about the implications for a changed sense of safety in the world. Try to keep a perspective. It is important to remember that despite these experiences, people have been able to find ways to be more stable and safe. It will be possible to eventually "go back to normal".
- People cope with crisis differently. Try to avoid judging or condemning others for their individual coping styles. Do not pressure family members to handle the disaster by either talking about it or by getting on with things. Both types of coping can work. However, most people find talking with others helpful.
- Check in with or stick close by family and friends. This is almost always a comfort to people when disaster strikes.
- Big traumatic events can bring up memories of past personal trauma. Be aware that this can happen; if needed, seek professional help.
- If you feel a need to be with members of your community on a broader level, contact your local religious organization or community center. Many of them will have specially organized events.
- Many people want to help. Check websites, TV or radio to find out what you can do.
- If reactions become overwhelming, seek professional help.
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Resource: Harborview's Traumatic Stress Counseling Program 07