

# PREPARE TODAY COPE BETTER TOMORROW

## STRESS DURING DISASTERS



# COPING WITH STRESS DURING A DISASTER

Disasters — natural events such as hurricanes, floods and earthquakes, or man-made events such as explosions and chemical, biological, nuclear or radiological disasters — are all stressful. They strike with little or no warning and destroy lives and communities, threatening personal safety and property.

Experiencing a disaster is stressful and it affects how we feel, think and act. There is no right or wrong way to react to a disaster — everyone reacts in his or her own way.

Learning how disasters affect us and preparing a strategy to manage stress during and immediately after disasters are both important for helping us cope more effectively.

This booklet provides basic information and practical advice about dealing with the stress and anxiety that are part of a disaster.

# FACTORS THAT MAKE DISASTERS STRESSFUL

Disasters are stressful events over which we have little or no control. The sudden disruption of everyday life, the experience of fear, feelings of uncertainty and a lost sense of safety are the common factors that make all disasters very stressful.

## UNCERTAINTY

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Not having a complete understanding of the threat can leave you frightened and uncertain of what to do to protect yourself and your loved ones. Events such as chemical, biological, nuclear and radiological (CBNR) disasters can create an even higher level of uncertainty since the threat is often invisible.

## LOSS OF SENSE OF SAFETY

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Witnessing or experiencing injury, being exposed to death and destruction, or becoming separated from loved ones can make you feel unsafe.

## DISRUPTION OF “NORMAL” LIFE

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Difficulties accessing daily necessities and the temporary disruption of family and community life (work, school, social gatherings) during or after disasters can be very distressing. Mandatory evacuations that can occur with little or no warning can also be very upsetting. Having to quickly decide which personal belongings to take,

navigating crowded evacuation routes, facing transportation delays and staying in shelters or with family and friends can all make evacuation a stressful experience.

### FEAR

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All disasters are frightening. You may fear for your own or your loved ones' well being as well as for the safety of your belongings. During a chemical, biological, nuclear or radiological event, you may fear that you could catch or spread a disease, that effective treatment is not available or that you may be contaminated with a potentially life-threatening substance.

### INTENT

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Events that are designed to hurt, kill and terrorize are extremely stressful to everyone exposed. Terrorist events are intentional acts of violence designed to disrupt life, create chaos and fear, and undermine your sense of safety.

## WHAT ARE THE NORMAL REACTIONS TO A DISASTER?

People react to disasters in many different ways. Learning to recognize the “normal” reactions to a disaster and understanding the wide range of feelings that people may experience and behaviors they may exhibit will help you cope more effectively.

### EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

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**Experiencing a disaster may affect the way you feel.**

You may experience:

- shock, or feel nothing at all
- sadness or depression
- guilt or loneliness
- anger, anxiety or severe panic

### PHYSICAL REACTIONS

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**Exposure to a disaster may affect the way your body functions.**

You may experience:

- exhaustion, dizziness, headaches or visual problems
- chills or profuse sweating
- breathing difficulties, chest pains or a rapid heartbeat
- gastrointestinal problems such as nausea or vomiting

### BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS

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**Experiencing a disaster can affect the way you act and the decisions you make.**

You may:

- feel that you are not acting “like yourself”
- become socially withdrawn
- feel irritable or have emotional outbursts
- be unable to rest
- experience conflicts and encounter difficulties at home or at work
- eat less or more than you did before the disaster

- smoke, drink or take drugs more frequently, to make yourself feel better

### COGNITIVE REACTIONS

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**It can also affect the way you think.**

You may:

- feel confused
- have difficulties concentrating and making decisions
- find solving problems difficult
- blame others for what happened

### SPIRITUAL REACTIONS

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**The way you experience a disaster can also influence your values and beliefs.**

You may:

- question your spiritual beliefs
- avoid your usual place of worship
- experience a newfound faith



In order to be prepared to cope with a disaster, you should know how to reduce stress during the event and its aftermath. This means learning how to take care of yourself and your family, knowing how to manage the stress inherent in disasters and finding out when and where to seek help.

### **TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF**

It is very important to take care of your own physical and emotional health during a disaster, since this will allow you to better cope with the situation.

#### **TAKING CARE OF YOUR BODY**

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- Make sure that you are getting enough sleep. Do not use alcohol or unprescribed medications to help your sleeping.
- Eat regular, healthy meals and remain physically active to help maintain your energy levels.
- Remember that turning to smoking, drinking or drugs to help you cope may cause additional problems in the future.

#### **TAKING CARE OF YOUR EMOTIONAL HEALTH**

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- Be aware of the normal reactions to a disaster; this will help you manage your own emotional response.
- Do things that help you recharge and feel in control of your life. Focus on your strengths and past accomplishments, and set realistic goals for the future.
- Try to remain positive and be patient with yourself.

- Do not watch or listen to repeated news coverage of the event. This kind of exposure can have a negative effect on your emotional health and ability to cope.

### REACHING OUT

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- Do not be afraid to talk about your experiences and emotions. Do not hesitate to ask for help if you feel overwhelmed, “low” or discouraged. These are normal reactions and are part of healing.
- Don’t become isolated. Seek the company and support of people who you enjoy being with, such as family and friends.

### REDUCING YOUR STRESS

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- Do things you find comforting such as reading, listening to music, exercising or socializing with friends.
- Try to stick to your daily routine as much as possible, but do not expect everything to get back to normal right away.

### MANAGING YOUR WORKLOAD

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- Maintain a healthy balance between work and rest. Take frequent breaks and give your body and mind enough time to rest and recharge.
- In trying to cope, do not let work take over your life. Remember to make time for your family and friends, as well as your own hobbies and interests.

### TAKING CARE OF FAMILY

Whether you experience a disaster directly, see it on television or hear about it from others, it will disrupt the normal flow of your life. Relationship problems and difficulties with children are not uncommon after disasters, but you can keep your family together and learn to cope as a team by taking a few simple actions:

- Spend time with your family and, as soon as possible, re-establish shared activities such as family meals, which can help recreate a sense of normality.
- Make time to talk to your family members and listen to what they have to say. Respect their feelings and remember that their reactions to the event may be different from yours.
- Remember that disasters can affect people's needs for company and alone time. For example, your children may want to be with you constantly, while your partner might require more time alone.

### YOUR CHILDREN

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Remember that children do not see and understand the world around them the same way you do. Following a disaster, they can become very anxious, scared or confused, and may require special attention, explanation and reassurance.

- Take time to talk to your children about their experience, and let them express their feelings.
- Children, especially young children, often blame themselves for what happened, and believe that they somehow caused the disaster by misbehaving. It is essential that you reassure them, and try and make them understand that they are in no way responsible.

### THE OLDER ADULTS IN YOUR FAMILY

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The elderly are especially vulnerable and experience extra stress after a disaster. This may include weakened health, worrying about how to rebuild their lives and fearing that they will be placed in an institution. You can reassure older adults and help them regain their hope for the future by being patient, listening and doing your best to understand and meet their needs.

- Don't let the elderly become socially withdrawn. Include them in the process of rebuilding your lives; this will also give them a sense of belonging and of being needed.
- Make sure that they are safe and that their basic personal and medical needs are addressed. Be patient if they seem confused or disoriented, especially since they may need further explanation and reassurance about the situation.

## GENERAL COPING TIPS

In the aftermath of a disaster, authorities must conduct an investigation and assess the type and extent of the damage in order to decide on the best method of response and public protection. This process takes time, so it is essential that you:

- Ensure your basic safety.
- Try to remain calm and be patient.
- Obtain essential information to ease your anxiety. Limit your exposure to disturbing media coverage of the event, since repeated exposure to traumatic images and reports can be very harmful.
- Obtain credible information and instructions on what to do from TV, radio, the Internet or emergency hotlines.
- Listen carefully to instructions given by the authorities, especially since these may change as the situation evolves.
- If you were separated from loved ones when the disaster occurred, try to contact them to see if they are safe and to let them know that you are all right. If phone lines are down, try text messaging or e-mailing. If you are still unable to reach them, and it is likely that they were at an explosion site, notify the authorities.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help in coping with the situation by calling emergency hotlines.
- Do not listen to or act upon rumors.

# DISASTER-SPECIFIC COPING TIPS

## COPING WITH AN EXPLOSION

**Explosions** are either accidents, or the result of terrorism. They can instantly injure or kill people and destroy property.

- If you are *at the explosion site* when the incident occurs, follow the instructions of the authorities.
- After an explosion, if you are *not at the site*, you may become anxious and feel that you must go and see what happened. **However, do not rush to the site, since it may not be safe.**

## COPING WITH A CHEMICAL EVENT

**Chemical disasters** result from the accidental or deliberate release of a toxic gas, liquid or solid material that can poison people and the environment.

- Chemical events can be very frightening. Extreme stress and anxiety can make you display symptoms that may make you look as if you were exposed to the chemical agent (even if you were not). These symptoms may include, but are not limited to, difficulty breathing, runny nose and eyes and acute nausea and vomiting.
- Try to obtain credible information to reduce your worry. Find out what you need to do to protect yourself and your loved ones, the specific signs and symptoms you need to look out for, and when and where to seek medical care if needed.

### COPING WITH A BIOLOGICAL EVENT

**Biological disasters** result from the release of viral, bacterial or other biological agents with the potential to cause either contagious or non-contagious disease when inhaled, eaten or received through broken skin.

- When faced with an invisible virus, bacteria or poison that can make you sick, stress is normal. Since extreme stress can weaken your body's immune system (which is what your body uses to fight diseases), try to reduce stress by calling information hotlines for advice and support.
- Follow the instructions given by the authorities since they will advise you about what to do, what symptoms to look for, and when and where to seek medical help.
- If instructed to do so, stay at home for safety. Some diseases can spread quickly from person to person, so if large numbers of people rush to hospitals and clinics, the disease will spread faster. You may only be exposing yourself unnecessarily by leaving home.

### COPING WITH RADIATION AND NUCLEAR EVENTS

**Radiological disasters** are the contamination of a smaller area with a radiological material, caused by an accident or a common explosive (a bomb) containing radioactive material.

**Nuclear disasters** are the widespread contamination of the environment with radioactive material, caused by a nuclear blast.

- Events involving radiation can be especially stressful due to the immediate and potential long-term harmful health effects they can have on you and your loved ones.
- To reduce your fear and help cope with the situation, listen to instructions regarding the safety of returning to retrieve belongings that were left in an area exposed to radiation.
- Be prepared to accept that recovery may take some extended time, and don't be afraid to use crisis counseling and support groups for help in adjusting and coping.

## COPING TIPS SPECIFIC TO RESPONSE MEASURES

After certain disasters, such as chemical, biological or radiological events, authorities may be required to introduce specific public health measures, such as evacuation, decontamination, social distancing or quarantine. These measures can be stressful.

## COPING WITH DECONTAMINATION

**Decontamination** is a cleaning process used in the aftermath of a CBNR event to eliminate radioactive, poisonous or other harmful substances from your body and the environment. During the process you may have to remove your clothes in front of strangers, give up personal belongings, or vacate your home temporarily or permanently if your neighborhood or home was directly affected.

Decontamination can be lifesaving, but it can also be very stressful. Do your best to stay positive and focus on the following:

- Remember that you are not alone — everyone around you is going through the same, unfamiliar experience. Try to reassure those around you, including family, friends or even strangers.
- Giving up essential devices such as hearing aids, wheelchairs or glasses for decontamination can make managing the process even more difficult. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it.
- After you have been decontaminated, it is normal to feel overwhelmed, confused or anxious. Do not hesitate to ask to talk to someone at the decontamination site for clarification and reassurance.

### COPING WITH SOCIAL DISTANCING AND QUARANTINE

**Social distancing** is a public health measure introduced by authorities to control the spread of an infectious disease by banning social events and public gatherings such as theatre shows, sports games, spiritual gatherings, and recreational and support groups. This may disrupt your daily routine and you may not be able to continue your life as normal for a limited time. Missing out on significant personal events and feeling isolated and out of touch with friends and family can make the experience very stressful.

- The interruption to your normal social life can be very stressful, but you can manage the situation by staying connected. Contact family and friends by telephone, e-mail or other available means of communication. Contact any groups you attend regularly. Most importantly, do not become isolated. If you feel

alone or in need of help, reach out — call one of the support lines listed at the end of this pamphlet.

**Quarantine** is the restriction of the movements of healthy people exposed to, or believed to have been exposed to a contagious disease. They are separated from the rest of the public, in order to monitor them and curb the spread of a potentially dangerous disease. If exposed, authorities may place you in home quarantine where you cannot leave your house, or in a specific health care facility for a *limited time*, both of which can make you feel isolated and stigmatized. In addition, you may become very anxious and afraid of getting sick, and worry about infecting others.

- If you or someone you care about is quarantined, remember that this measure is essential for the health and safety of everyone in the community. Remain patient, calm and positive, and remember that feeling distressed is normal.
- It is normal, while in quarantine, to worry about getting sick and about what is going on “outside.” If you feel anxious or scared, do not hesitate to ask for help.
- Keep in touch with your loved ones using the available methods of communication.

## COPING WITH EVACUATION

- Disasters often mean being evacuated for safety; being displaced from your home can be very stressful. The lack of privacy while living in a community shelter will be difficult for you and your family. Do your best to allow everyone in your family their own time and space when possible. Try to remain positive and focus on your ability to adapt to the new situation.

## MAKING A PLAN AND PREPARING

Creating a household disaster plan, assembling an emergency supply kit and a “go-bag” are things you can do to prepare for any emergency. Taking these steps will help you feel more able to cope with any emergency or disaster. For additional information on how to prepare, visit the New York City Office of Emergency Management (OEM) website [NYC.gov/oem](http://NYC.gov/oem) or dial 311.



The time needed to recover after experiencing a disaster varies from person to person. The process can take weeks, months or even years. The healing of your emotions, just like the healing of your body after an injury, will take time. If, one month after witnessing or experiencing a disaster, you or your loved ones are still experiencing persistent or increasing symptoms of stress, or if stress is interfering with your everyday functioning, it is advisable to consider seeking help.

The persistent symptoms you may experience after a disaster can include:

- Having little energy or feeling tired all the time
- Losing interest in doing things you used to enjoy
- Feeling restless or irritable
- Experiencing conflicts at work, home or school
- Having trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much or too little
- Having poor appetite or overeating
- Having difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Drinking more alcohol than before or using or abusing other substances
- Being anxious or experiencing strong feelings of fear, horror or helplessness
- Constantly reliving the event through nightmares or vivid, painful memories and flashbacks

## SEEKING HELP

- Avoiding places, situations or conversations that remind you of the event
- Feeling guilty, sad or hopeless
- Having thoughts of death or suicide
- Behaving as if you are still in danger by being anxious and constantly on your guard

To find help you can call **800-Lifenet**, a 24/7 crisis line. LifeNet staff are mental health professionals who speak a variety of languages:

- English 800-Lifenet (800-543-36380 )
- Spanish 877-AYUDESE (877-298-33730)
- Asian 877-990-8585
- Deaf/Hearing Impaired (TTY) 212-982-5284

You can also visit their website at [www.mhaofnyc.org](http://www.mhaofnyc.org)

List of selected literature available at <http://www.nyc.gov/doh/downloads/pdf/dmh-cope-with-stress.htm>



# REMEMBER

- Most people will experience symptoms of stress in the immediate or short-term aftermath of a disaster.
- Everyone experiences stress in their own way and at different times, depending on their personality, age, gender and circumstances.
  - Most reactions to a disaster are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.
  - Most symptoms are transient and will disappear within a few weeks.
- Stress and anxiety can appear as physical symptoms.

## *After experiencing a disaster:*

***Be patient with yourself and those around you –  
Give everyone time to cope, adapt and heal!***

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