

Disaster Psychology

PREPAREDNESS



When disaster strikes, physical assistance may not be only part of what survivors need. "Psychological First Aid" for disaster-induced stress and trauma will help the survivors.

Disaster-induced stress and trauma are "normal reactions" to an "abnormal" event.

Emotional reactions will vary and may be influenced by:

- Prior experience with the same or similar event
- The intensity and length of the event
- Pre-incident stressors
- The length of time since the event
- Loss of loved ones, housing, etc...

Emotional reactions can vary depending upon the phase of the event:

- Before the event, as concern escalates and information is made available through the media and the authorities
- During the event's impact - responding to the immediate effects of the disaster
- Immediately after the event's impact when rescue may be needed
- Immediately after the event when an inventory is made of losses - personal and material
- Well after the event during recovery

Traumatic Stress Reactions

A traumatic stress reaction is an emotional aftershock of a disaster or other significantly stressful event. Symptoms may occur immediately after the event or weeks after the event is over.

Some common signs/symptoms of emotional reactions to a disaster:

Physical

- Nausea and/or upset stomach
- Dizziness
- Headache
- Restlessness

- Difficulty sleeping

Emotional

- Anxiety and/or fear
- Guilt
- Grief and/or depression
- Anger

Cognitive

- Nightmares
- Confusion and/or disorientation
- Difficulty concentrating

Behavioral

- Avoidance and/or withdrawing
- Emotional outbursts
- Erratic behavior

Dial 9-1-1 for life threatening emergencies

Emergency Contacts

Emotional emergencies or information 24 hours a day in Bergen: 262-HELP (201-262-4357)

Physical emergencies - dial 9-1-1

Taking care of yourself following a traumatic event . . .

- Try to rest a bit more
- Contact friends and talk
- Re-establish your normal schedule as soon as possible
- Fight against boredom
- Physical activity can be helpful
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even when you don't feel like it)
- Avoid alcohol and drugs taken without physician recommendation/prescription
- Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal - don't try to fight them - they'll decrease over time and be less painful
- Seek out professional help if the feelings become prolonged or intense

Taking care of others following a traumatic event . . .

- Listen carefully
- Spend time with the traumatized person
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if they have not asked for help
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for children etc. . . .
- Give them time to be alone
- Help them stay away from alcohol and drugs
- Keep in mind what they've been through
- Don't try to explain it away
- Don't tell them that they are lucky it wasn't worse
- Don't take their anger, other feelings or outbursts personally

Get further assistance if...

- The person is having life-threatening symptoms
- The person is suicidal or homicidal
- The person is out of control

For Further Information:

On the web:

www.bcoem.org

Or call:

Bergen County Office of Emergency Management at 201-785-5757

