

Emotional First Aid

When traumatic events happen, they challenge our sense of safety and predictability and this may trigger strong physical and emotional reactions in us. These reactions are normal. Emotional First Aid gives you information on how to help yourself, your family and friends in response to witnessing, hearing or living through traumatic events.

Dos and Don'ts:

- Try to get the information about your loved ones ASAP, watch the news for a limited time to get the information you need and then turn off the TV or the radio for a while. You can turn the TV on every two hours to get more details, but do not get hooked on the repetitive traumatic images it is showing. These images have the uncanny ability to suck us in and keep us glued to the screen, even if it makes us feel worse afterwards. Resist the pull to watch.
- Don't be isolated. Organize and meet in community groups, in neighborhoods, community and religious centers. Get together with family and friends and support each other. The understanding and support of our loved ones helps us cope with tragedy much faster. It is crucial to validate the feelings of fear and helplessness of others, even if we are coping better than they are. People have different ways of responding to shocking events. There is no right or wrong reaction.
- Seek professional help if your reaction feels too strong to handle on your own or with your friends. It doesn't mean you are crazy or weak.
- Keep busy and have as structured a schedule as possible to help you stay grounded.
- It is crucial to refocus on your resources, anything that helps you feel calmer, stronger and more grounded. Refocus on all your support systems, whether people, activities or places. Do things that keep your mind occupied, such as watching a movie, knitting, gardening, cooking, playing with children or pets or going in nature.
- Write your sensations, feelings and thoughts. It has been shown to help discharge the anxiety and regain control.
- Get sufficient rest. The tendency is to run on adrenaline and exhaust our body.
- Encourage yourself and others not to tell stories in a repetitive way, which ultimately deepens the trauma; instead support and hear each other about this real tragedy/catastrophe, but with interruptions of the story from beginning to end. Allow yourself to feel the feelings you are feeling even if they are not pretty. Anger, rage and the desire for revenge are very natural responses to man-made traumatic events. Feel your feelings and allow your emotions to be expressed in a rational framework. This will help you to process feelings without overwhelming yourself and help you not get stuck in obsessive thinking.
- Feelings are not actions. Make sure you chose to take productive actions.

- Stay active and volunteer to help in hospitals or to give blood. You can send money or help staff helplines for distressed people. Help traumatized friends and family by listening to them without judgment. Do not take it personally if they are angry or blaming. Let them spend time with their children, give them private time by helping them with normal everyday household tasks.

Psychological Response:

People can have many different reactions to the tragedy, or feel all of them in sequence. Often we first feel shock, then denial, anger and depression before we move to grief and acceptance.

- Some will be in shock, stunned and dissociated for a while. They may feel disoriented in time, and place, and sometimes in person. They may feel numb and cut off from the terror and pain.
- People may feel fear and deep sorrow, uncertainty and helplessness. These feelings are normal too and will pass.
- People may feel confused, not able to think well, concentrate, remember things or problem-solve. They may feel depressed, exhausted unable to rest and wanting to withdraw. All these feelings are normal if they don't last for a long time.
- People may feel agitated, anxious, hyper-alert and hyper-vigilant ('on guard'), easily irritated and unable to control their emotions. They need to engage in activities and creative expression that calms them. Being with family members and friends can help calming.
- People may feel suspicious and paranoid. They may feel intense anger and want to engage in antisocial acts. They can become very critical and blame everyone. It is important to talk to friends and check with them on the reality of our impressions and to not engage in any act that we cannot share with different friends.
- Children may become 'clingy' and have nightmares. They may have stomachaches and headaches. Alternatively, they may act out aggressively. This is normal. It might last a few days or more but it will pass. They need to be reassured and to feel protected.

Physiological response:

It is natural to have a physical reaction to this stress, so don't let these scare you. It is good to recognize signs of 'activation' and not be scared by them:

- heart beating faster
- difficulty breathing
- blood pressure going up
- stomach tightening, knot in the throat
- muscles tremors
- skin cold and racing thoughts.

These reactions will dissipate if we don't fight them.

- People might experience some difficulty sleeping, want to eat too much, eat salty or sweet food, and might want to engage in addictive behaviors such as excessive use of alcohol or drugs. The best ‘antidote’ is to try to be aware of those and other impulses, and to accept that you are deeply upset and that it will pass.
- Some peoples’ old unresolved traumas may get re-triggered. Their sense of safety and trust may get shaken. They need to be reminded or remind themselves of their names, their actual age and today’s date and place.
- Peoples’ symptoms can be very diverse. They can be stable, or come and go. They can occur in clusters.

Helpful responses:

We can help our nervous system recuperate its balance by understanding how it discharges when it is over-stimulated. Some examples of this are:

- trembling, shaking or sweating
- warmth in our body
- stomach gurgling
- breathing deeply
- crying or laughing

These are good. It means that we are discharging some of this the energy and coming back into balance. Mostly, we just want to observe what’s happening in our body without judgment, just watching and understanding that our body has the innate ability to regain its balance if we just let it feel what it feels, and give it the time to do what it wants to do.

What to do:

It is very important to stay ‘grounded.’ If you are feeling disoriented, confused, upset and in disbelief, you can do the following exercise:

- Sit on a chair, feel your feet on the ground, press on your thighs, feel your behind on the seat, and your back supported by the chair; look around you and pick six objects that have red or blue. This should allow you to feel in the present, more grounded and in your body. Notice how your breath gets deeper and calmer. You may want to go outdoors and find a peaceful place to sit on the grass. As you do, feel how your bottom can be held and supported by the ground.
- Here is an exercise that will allow you to feel your body as a ‘container’ to hold your feelings. Gently pat the different parts of your body with your hand, with a loose wrist. Your body may feel more tingling, more alive and sharp. You may feel more connected to your feelings.
- Another exercise is to tense your muscles, each group at a time. Hold your shoulders with arms across your chest, tighten your grip on them and pat your arms up and down. Do the same with your legs, tighten them

and hold them from the outside, patting through their length. Tighten your back, tighten your front, and then gently release the tension. This may help you or your loved one feel more balanced.

- Sports, aerobics and weight training help avoid depression and are a channel for aggression.

If you believe in prayer or in some sort of greater power, pray for the rest of the souls of the dead, for the healing of the wounded, for consolation for the grieving. Pray for peace, for understanding and wisdom and for the forces of goodness to prevail. Do not give up faith in the ultimate goodness of being and keep your trust in humanity.

And last, just know that we humans are extremely resilient and have been able to recuperate from the most horrendous tragedies. Furthermore we have the ability to let ourselves be transformed by our traumas, when we heal them and open ourselves to the possibility

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