



coping with a major personal crisis

Someone close to you may have died. You may have been injured yourself or you may have witnessed the death and injury of others. Your experience was a very personal one but this leaflet will help you to know how others have reacted in similar situations. It will also suggest ways in which you can help healing to occur and how you can avoid some pitfalls.

1. What you may experience

Fear

- of damage to yourself and those you love.
- of being left alone, of having to leave loved ones.
- of 'breaking down' or 'losing control'.
- of a similar event happening again.

Helplessness

- crises show up human powerlessness as well as strength.

Sadness

- for deaths, injuries and losses of every kind.

Longing

- for all that has gone.

Guilt

- for being better off than others, ie being alive, not injured.
- regrets for things not done.

Shame

- for having been exposed as helpless, 'emotional' and needing others.
- for not having reacted as you would have wished.

Anger

- at what has happened, at whoever caused it or allowed it to happen.
- at the injustice and senselessness of it all.
- at the shame and the indignities.
- at other people's lack of understanding and inefficiencies.
- "Why me?"

Memories

- of feelings, of loss or of love for the other people in your life who have been injured or who have died.

Let down

- disappointment for all the plans that cannot be fulfilled.

Hope

- for the future, for better times.

Numbness

- Your mind may allow the misfortune to be felt only slowly. At first you may feel numb. The event may seem unreal, like a dream, something that has not really happened. People often see this wrongly as being 'strong' or 'uncaring'.

Dreams

- You may find yourself repeatedly dreaming about what happened.

Physical Symptoms

- After a profound shock you may find you experience symptoms such as loss of appetite, difficulty in sleeping or exhaustion. These usually pass, but consult your doctor if they persist.

Accidents

- A disaster may become the main thing that you think about for a long time. The stress of this and the lack of ability to focus on the here and now may make you more accident-prone.

Alcohol and drugs

- The extra tension may lead you to increase your intake of substances which you feel dull the pain temporarily. It is important to seek help if this is happening repeatedly.

It is common to have some or all of these feelings after a disaster and you may experience them immediately or some time later. The feelings can be very strong and frightening, especially if a death was sudden or violent, or a body was not recovered, or if many people died. It can feel as if you are losing control or 'going mad', but for most people the feelings become less intense over time.

Many people find that crying can give relief but it is also common to have other responses, such as a desire to be alone.

2. Family and social relationships

A crisis can bring people together and lead to new friendships, but it can also create tensions and strains. Some families are able to support one another, but this is not always possible and conflicts can emerge. Relationships between partners can also be affected.

3. Children

- Like adults, children appreciate having their thoughts and feelings acknowledged. Children often find it easier to draw or play out events and feelings, and it helps them if adults pay attention to them and show interest in what they are doing. Allowing them to reveal what they think and feel in this way will help them cope.
- Children may seem fine one moment, then in great distress and quickly fine again. This can be confusing for adults.
- It can help children to keep to their usual routine, such as school and activities, if they want to. But they may also wish to be included in any family rituals, such as funerals. Participating will help them cope better in the future.
- It will help if the school knows what has happened.

4. What can help?

Reality

- Attending funerals, returning to the scene, talking to people who know what happened, are all ways in which a situation which seems 'unbelievable' may be made more credible and easier to bear.

Talking

- Many people find it helpful to talk about what happened and how they feel, over and over again. This can be an important part of the healing process.

Support

- Sharing with others who have had similar experiences can help. For some, help with the practicalities of everyday life from caring friends and family is a welcome release and will allow them to focus on the disaster for as long as they need. For others, it is a relief to have ordinary things to concentrate on. Many people say that they want to be asked but would like to choose which approach is most helpful.

Privacy

- Some people want to be left on their own. You may also find it easier to be with a few select people than with groups of people who don't know what has happened.

5. When to seek help

- If you feel you cannot handle intense feelings or body sensations.
- If you feel that your emotions are not falling into place over a period of time and you feel chronic tension, confusion, emptiness or exhaustion.
- If, for a long period, you have to keep active in order to avoid painful feelings.
- If you continue to have nightmares and poor sleep.
- If you have no person or group with whom to share your emotions, but you feel the need to do so.
- If your relationships seem to be suffering badly, or sexual problems develop.
- If you have accidents.
- If you continue to smoke, drink or take drugs in excess since the event.
- If your work performance suffers.
- If those around you are particularly vulnerable or are not healing satisfactorily.
- If as a helper you are suffering from exhaustion.

6. Where to find help

- Your family doctor
- The Social Services Department of your local Council
- Cruse Bereavement Care
PO Box 800, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1RG
Branches throughout the UK (see the website www.cruse.org.uk)
- The Samaritans

Call us on 0844 477 9400

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