

Helping People after a Disaster

NORMAL REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

Each person responds to trauma differently. It can help people to know that their reactions are normal, that reactions will often vary from day to day, and that they will go away with time. These are some normal reactions when people are overwhelmed by a traumatic experience:

- **Physical:** People may find that their heart pounds and they breathe quickly. They may have headaches and stomachaches. They may have trouble sleeping or have no appetite. They may feel shaky or exhausted.
- **Mental:** They may be confused and unable to concentrate or to make good decisions.
- **Emotional:** They may be anxious, depressed, or overwhelmed. They may blame themselves for what happened. They may be irritable, angry or violent. They may feel numb.
- **Behavioral:** They may want to be alone. They may try to avoid how they are feeling by using drugs or alcohol, working non-stop, overeating, and so forth. They may do things that, in the end, will bring them harm, like smoking, spending more than they can afford, engaging in illicit sex, and so on. They may have accidents.

Following traumatic experiences, people must grieve their losses in order to heal. Grieving is a process with ups and downs that often takes a long time.

CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

Children may have unique ways of dealing with trauma and are often unable to express their feelings in words. These are some of the ways they may be affected:

- **Emotional:** They may become fearful, angry and aggressive, or sad. They may lose interest in life or school. They may feel that they are somehow responsible for what happened. Older children may feel guilty that they survived when others did not.

- **Physical:** Their speech may be affected. They may lose their appetite. They may complain about headaches, stomachaches, or other aches. They could have hives or asthma.
- **Behavior:** They may regress and start sucking their thumbs or wetting the bed again. They may have nightmares or bad dreams. They may cry a lot. They may be deeply upset if they lose something that matters to them, like a stuffed animal. They may do poorly in school because they cannot concentrate. Older children may struggle with using drugs or alcohol or engage in risky behavior. They may be more susceptible to self-harm.

**The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.**

Psalm 34:18 NIV

THINGS THAT WILL HELP RECOVERY

- Finding aspects of their situation they can influence or control.
- Connecting with available resources to begin to rebuild their lives and self-confidence.
- Taking care of their body by eating well, exercising, and getting as much sleep as their body needs to recover.
- Reestablishing routines and setting small goals that they can accomplish.
- Expressing their pain. They should talk to someone who is a good listener. Write or draw about what happened and share it with someone.
- Telling God how they are feeling, either in prayer or by writing it in a letter or lament (read Psalm 13 as an example).
- Singing or listening to soothing music.
- Laughing when they can. Crying as needed.
- Spending time with people who are positive and helpful.
- Asking for help and accepting the help others offer.
- Learning to calm themselves with a breathing exercise.
- When people are willing, praying aloud with and for them.

**For I am convinced that neither death nor life,
neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future,
nor any powers, neither height nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us
from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Romans 8:38-39 NIV

THINGS THAT WILL SLOW RECOVERY

- Making big decisions.
- Being very busy.
- Drinking alcohol or drinks with too much caffeine.
- Taking drugs to sleep.
- Talking in public about their experience before they have had time to recover.
- Listening to many others retell their traumas.

TELLING THEIR STORY

After a disaster, people need an opportunity to tell someone what happened to them. Telling their story is a very important part of recovery. It allows people to process what they have experienced and begin to deal with it emotionally. After people talk about the facts of their story, and their thoughts about it, also invite them to talk about their emotional experience.

If possible, meet with people individually or in a small group. If you are listening to two or more people together, encourage them to share their story but not to dwell too much on the most difficult parts, as that may traumatize the others. Things to remember:

- Keep information confidential
- Listen in a caring manner
- Do not criticize or give them quick solutions
- Do not minimize their pain by comparing it with your own pain

These are questions that can be used to guide your listening:

1. What happened?
2. How did you feel?
3. What was the hardest part?

Use these additional questions, if appropriate, to help them recognize any good things that have come from the situation:

4. Who helped you?
5. Were you able to help others?
6. What gave you strength to get through?
7. Did you see God in this situation? Explain.

If the person is not able to talk about their experience, ask them to draw a picture and then try to discuss it. Expressing feelings through art can be especially helpful for children who haven't yet developed the ability to talk through their feelings and reactions.

Writing a lament or a letter to God expressing their feelings can be very healing. The important thing is to encourage them to be honest with God about their

feelings. God is strong enough to handle honesty. With time, encourage them to remember God's faithfulness, even in these trying circumstances.

If possible, stay in contact with the people who have shared, and invite them to join a trauma healing group after things have settled and they are able to reflect more on their experiences.

People should be calm before they leave. Doing breathing exercises individually or in a group can help them relax before they go.

CARING FOR CAREGIVERS

Caregivers have often experienced their own trauma, and can be further affected by hearing about the experiences and feelings of others. After listening sessions, someone should listen to the facilitators themselves so they can express how they were affected by what they heard and saw. This can be done individually or in a small group. Praying together for trauma victims is helpful to assist the caregivers in releasing the pain and responsibility to God, and to invite God's power to bring victims the help they need.

Caregivers, too, can benefit greatly from drawing or writing about their feelings. The Container Exercise below can help caregivers get through the process of helping others and then process their own pain.

CONTAINER EXERCISE

Sometimes we can be overwhelmed by what we have experienced but we are not in a situation where we can express how we feel. This exercise can be helpful.

Close your eyes, or just look down at the floor so you are not distracted. Imagine a big container. It could be a big box or a shipping container. Imagine a way to lock the container, like a key or a padlock.

Now imagine putting all the things that are disturbing you right now into the container: big things, small things—everything that is disturbing you. When they are all inside the container, close it. Now lock the container and put the key somewhere safe. Do not throw it away. When you are ready, open your eyes and look up.

Later, find a time when you can get quiet. Take the key, open the container, and take out the things you have put inside one by one. You may want to do this with someone who can help you talk about these things. Do not leave them in the container forever!