

Emotional Aftermath of Disasters

How we deal with a disaster

Each person's experience of and feelings about a disaster are unique; some people may experience problems because of it and others may not. We recommend that all those directly affected by a disaster should visit their GP. Although everyone responds in different ways at different times following a trauma, it may be useful to have on your record that you have been involved in a disaster.

Some of the more common reactions to a traumatic event include loss of appetite or sleepless nights, difficulty in concentrating, feeling anxious, angry or on edge, difficulty in relating to family or friends who have not shared your experience, as well as re-living the disaster and vivid memories. Such reactions are not abnormal and are your mind and body's way of making sense of what happened. However, if these reactions persist or are disturbing then it may be sensible to access help in dealing with them.

When reactions persist they can sometimes develop into a recognised psychological disorder. This could be a depressive illness or an anxiety disorder, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Getting a diagnosis from your GP or a psychiatrist can feel stigmatising and you may be worried about how this will affect your work, your relationships and your sense of who you are. However, if you have developed a post traumatic disorder then it is important you get the right treatment and support. Getting a diagnosis from a doctor can help in terms of having a traumatic experience recognised, in getting access to specialist mental health services for effective treatment, and in receiving compensation. The good news is that post traumatic disorders (whether PTSD, depression or anxiety) are very treatable with evidence-based psychological therapies. You can read more about these at the website of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). Your GP service can act as a gateway to mental health services and specialist treatment, if necessary.

Traumatic Bereavement

When someone you love dies in a disaster then you are faced with the trauma of the event and the grief of bereavement. Things will never get back to normal and the idea of recovery or moving on may feel alien and insensitive. Grieving is hard work in any circumstances but there can be particular challenges when the bereavement is the result of a disaster. If you were also involved in the disaster, you may wish you had died too and/or feel guilt at surviving when your loved one did not. You may have distressing memories of the disaster and what happened to you and your loved one. If you weren't involved in the disaster you may still have disturbing thoughts and pictures about the disaster perhaps from the media coverage of the event, or just from your imagination. These memories or images can be very distressing and can make it hard for you to find happy memories of your loved one. The sadness of loss can be complicated by feelings of anger, guilt or confusion. Trauma can keep people trapped in the first terrible moment of discovering that their loved one is dead. It gets in the way of grieving, blocking the process by which we try to find a way to live on without the person we love.

If you have any of the post traumatic reactions described above, or feel that you're stuck in that terrible first moment of grief then consider talking to your GP or to an organisation like CRUSE bereavement care. They will be able to discuss what support is available for you at this very difficult time.

Further Information

Support Groups and Caring Organisations

Useful Contacts

Further Information