

When Terrible Things Happen: For Adults

Immediate Reactions

There are a wide variety of positive and negative reactions that survivors can experience during and immediately after an emergency. These include:

Domain	Negative Responses	Positive Responses
Cognitive	Confusion, disorientation, worry, intrusive thoughts and images, self-blame	Determination and resolve, sharper perception, courage, optimism, faith
Emotional	Shock, sorrow, grief, sadness, fear, anger, numbness, irritability, guilt, and shame	Feeling involved, challenged, mobilized
Social	Extreme withdrawal, interpersonal conflict	Social connectedness, altruistic helping behaviors
Physiological	Fatigue, headache, muscle tension, stomachache, increased heart rate, exaggerated startle response, difficulties sleeping	Alertness, readiness to respond, increased energy

Common Negative Reactions That May Continue

Intrusive reactions

- Distressing thoughts or images of the event while awake or dreaming
- Upsetting emotional or physical reactions to reminders of the experience
- Feeling as if the experience is happening all over again ("flashbacks")

Avoidance and withdrawal reactions

- Avoiding talking, thinking, or having feelings about the traumatic event
- Avoiding reminders of the event (places and people connected to what happened)
- Restricted emotions, feeling numb
- Feelings of detachment and estrangement from others, social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in usually pleasurable activities

Physical arousal reactions

- Constantly being “on the lookout” for danger, startling easily, or being jumpy
- Irritability or outbursts of anger, feeling “on edge”
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep, problems concentrating or paying attention

Reactions to trauma and loss reminders

- Reactions to places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that are reminders of the traumatic event
 - Reminders can bring on distressing mental images, thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions
 - Common examples include sudden loud noises, sirens, locations where the event occurred, seeing people with disabilities, funerals, anniversaries of the event, birthday of the deceased, and media reports about the event or its aftermath

Positive changes in priorities, worldview, and expectations

- Enhanced appreciation that family and friends are precious and important
- Meeting the challenge of addressing difficulties (by taking positive action steps, changing the focus of thoughts, using humor, acceptance)
- Shifting expectations about what to expect from day to day and about what is considered a “good day”
- Shifting priorities to focus more on quality time with family or friends
- Increased commitment to self, family, friends, and spiritual/religious faith

Common Reactions When a Loved One Dies

- Confusion, numbness, disbelief, bewilderment, feeling lost
- Feeling angry at the person who died or at people considered responsible for the death
- Strong physical reactions, such as nausea, fatigue, shakiness, and muscle weakness
- Feeling guilty for still being alive
- Intense emotions, such as extreme sadness, anger, or fear
- Increased risk for physical illness and injury
- Decreased productivity or difficulty making decisions
- Having thoughts about the person who died, even when you don’t want to
- Longing for, missing, and wanting to search for the person who died
- Worry that they themselves or another loved one might die
- Anxiety when separated from caregivers or other loved ones
- Heightened sense of the role of spirituality and/or religion



What Doesn't Help

- ✗ Doing risky things (driving recklessly, substance abuse, not taking adequate precautions)
- ✗ Overeating or not eating
- ✗ Not taking care of yourself
- ✗ Extreme withdrawal from family or friends
- ✗ Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking about the event or the death of a loved one
- ✗ Working too much
- ✗ Using alcohol or drugs to cope
- ✗ Excessive watching television or spending time on the internet
- ✗ Withdrawing from pleasant activities
- ✗ Violence or conflict
- ✗ Blaming others

What Helps

- ✓ Seeking a community religious professional
- ✓ Positive reminiscing about a loved one who has died
- ✓ Seeking counseling
- ✓ Taking breaks
- ✓ Keeping a journal
- ✓ Exercising in moderation
- ✓ Trying to maintain a normal schedule
- ✓ Participating in a support group
- ✓ Getting adequate rest and eating healthy meals
- ✓ Using relaxation methods (breathing exercises, meditation, calming self-talk, soothing music)
- ✓ Scheduling and engaging in positive activities (sports, hobbies, reading)
- ✓ Focusing on something practical to do right now to manage the situation
- ✓ Talking to another person to get support or spending time with others

Connecting with Others: For Adults

SEEKING SOCIAL SUPPORT

- Making contact with others can help reduce feelings of distress
- Adults can benefit from spending time with other similar-age peers
- Adults need the support of familiar adults to cope with traumatic events
- Support can come from family, friends, teachers, or others coping with the same traumatic event

Social Support Options

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spouse or partner • Trusted family member • Close friend | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clergy • Doctor or nurse • Counselor | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support group • Co-worker/Teacher • Pet |
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Do . . .

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Decide carefully whom to talk to ✓ Decide ahead of time what you want to discuss ✓ Choose the right time and place | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Start by talking about practical things ✓ Let others know you need to talk or just to be with them ✓ Talk about painful thoughts and feelings when you're ready | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ask others if it's a good time to talk ✓ Tell others you appreciate their listening ✓ Tell others what you need or how they can help—name one main thing that would help you right now |
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Don't . . .

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Keep quiet because you don't want to upset others ✗ Keep quiet because you're worried about being a burden | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Start by talking about practical things ✗ Let others know you need to talk or just to be with them |
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Ways to Get Connected

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call friends or family on the phone • Increase contact with the acquaintances and friends you have now • Renew or begin involvement with a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or other group | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get involved with a support group • Get involved in community recovery activities |
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Connecting with Others: For Adults

GIVING SOCIAL SUPPORT

You can help family members and friends cope with the emergency by spending time with them and listening carefully. You may also feel better yourself when you give support to others. Most people recover best when they feel connected to people who care about them. Some people choose not to talk about their experiences very much, while others do need to discuss their experiences. For some, talking about what happened can help those events seem less overwhelming. For others, just spending quiet time with people who are close and accepting can feel best. Here is some information about giving social support to other people.

Reasons Why People May Avoid Social Support

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not knowing what they need • Feeling embarrassed or “weak” • Feeling they will lose control | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not wanting to burden others • Doubting it will be helpful or thinking that others won’t understand • Having tried unsuccessfully to get help in the past | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wanting to avoid thinking or feeling about the event • Feeling that others will be disappointed or judgmental • Not knowing where to get help |
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Good Things to Do When Giving Support

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show interest, attention, and that you care • Find a time and place to talk without interruption • Have no expectations; don’t judge | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show respect for the person’s reactions and ways of coping • Acknowledge that this type of stress can take time to resolve • Help brainstorm positive ways to deal with his/her reactions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about expected reactions to traumatic events and healthy coping • Express belief that the person is capable of recovery • Offer to talk or spend time together as many times as is needed |
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Things That Interfere with Giving Support

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rushing to tell someone that he/she will be okay or that he/she should just “get over it” • Discussing your personal experiences without listening to the other person’s story • Stopping the person from talking about what is bothering him/her | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acting like someone is weak or exaggerating, because he/she isn’t coping as well as you are • Giving advice without listening to the person’s concerns or asking what works for him/her • Telling the person he/she was lucky it wasn’t worse |
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Ways to Get Connected

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let the person know that experts think persistent avoidance and withdrawal are likely to increase distress, while social support helps recovery • Encourage the person to join a support group with others who have had similar experiences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage the person to talk with a counselor, clergy, or medical professional, and offer to accompany him/her • Enlist help from others in your social circle, so that you all take part in supporting the person |
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Tips for Relaxation

Tension and anxiety are common feelings after crises. These feelings can make it more difficult to cope with the many things that must be done to recover. Using relaxation exercises to calm yourself during the day may make it easier to sleep, concentrate, and have energy for coping with life. These exercises can include slow breathing, meditation, swimming, stretching, yoga, prayer, listening to quiet music, spending time outdoors. Here are breathing exercises that may help:

Adults and Teens	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inhale slowly (one-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three) through your nose or mouth, and comfortably fill your lungs. 2. Silently and gently say to yourself, "I'm filling my body with calm." 3. Exhale slowly (one-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three) through your mouth, and comfortably empty your lungs. 4. Silently and gently say to yourself, "I'm letting the tension drain away." 5. Repeat five times slowly.
Children (practice with your child)	<p>Let's practice a different way of breathing that can help calm our bodies down.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I want each of you to think about your favorite color. Okay, we are going to breathe in through our noses or mouths. When we breathe in, we are going to think about our favorite color and the beautiful things you connect with that color. 2. Next, we will breathe out through our mouths. When we breathe out, we are going to breathe out the gray and the uncomfortable feelings that have been building up. Let out the air, slowly and quietly. 3. Let's try it together. Breathe in really slowly and inhale thinking about your favorite color and the beautiful things connected to this color, while I count to three. One, two, three. Good job. Now, while I count again, slowly let the air out while thinking about the color gray and all the unpleasant feelings. One, two, three. Great job. Let's try it together again. [Remember to praise children for their efforts.]

Tips for Families:

- Find a room where everyone can spread out and have his/her own space.
- Some family members will want to lie down, others will want to sit. Some will want to close their eyes, and some will want to keep them open. Encourage everyone to find a way that feels most comfortable to them.
- Take time to practice this when everyone is calm. That way, everyone will be better able to use the breathing exercise when they are feeling upset.
- For young children, turn the breathing exercise into a game. Blow soap bubbles with a wand or blow cotton balls across a tabletop. Get creative and make it fun.