

## Psychological First Aid

To be most effective in supporting someone following a disaster, you can:

- Help people meet basic needs for food, shelter, and health care needs
- Listen to people who want to talk about their experiences, and accept their feelings as valid
- Strive to be compassionate and supportive, even when people are being difficult
- Provide accurate information about the event, relief efforts, and available services
- Help people contact friends and loved ones
- Help keep families together
- Offer practical suggestions, when requested

To maximize your support for someone coping with disaster, you can avoid:

- Pushing people to share stories or personal details related to the event
- Giving dismissive reassurances, such as “everything will be okay” or “don’t worry”
- Telling people how they should feel
- Implying responsibility or blame on the part of survivors
- Making promises that may not be kept
- Criticizing existing services or relief efforts

## HOW DO I CONTACT THE CENTER FOR WORK AND FAMILY LIFE (CWFL)?

If you are a USC staff or faculty member and are interested in scheduling an appointment with a counselor or receiving information regarding resources and referrals, phone the CWFL at (213) 821-0800. If you are an immediate family member of a USC employee, you may also phone the Center directly to request services. CWFL services are available at all USC sites by appointment.

The Center for Work and Family Life is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

## SUPPORTING EACH OTHER IN TIMES OF CRISIS OR DISASTER

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# Supporting Each Other in Times of Crisis or Disaster

## Understanding Crisis/ Disaster

Disasters or crises are highly distressing to almost anyone, may involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, and can cause people to respond with intense fear or helplessness. These events can take many forms. Earthquakes, fires, serious accidents, epidemics, acts of violence, and even mass layoffs are commonly perceived as traumatic, and can cause a wide range of emotional and physical reactions. The impact of these events depends on several factors, including a person's level of involvement in the event, how terrifying or hurtful it was, past experiences of crisis or emotional difficulties, and the level of support the person receives after the event.

### Physical Reactions to crisis may include:

- Nervousness, restlessness
- Fatigue
- Aches & pains, gastrointestinal distress
- Changes in appetite, sleep, or sex drive

### Emotional or Behavioral Reactions to crisis or disaster may include:

- Shock or disbelief
- Fear, anxiety, panic
- Anger, irritability, or mood swings
- Sadness, grief, despair
- Hyper-vigilance, easily startled
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks—re-experiencing the traumatic event
- Emotional numbing or detachment
- Loss of sense of order or fairness in the world
- Expectations of doom or shortened future
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Diminished interest in everyday activities, or activities that were previously enjoyable
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Appetite loss or over-eating
- Feelings of self-blame, guilt, or shame

## Common Concerns Following Disaster

Although disasters may create specific concerns (for example, housing, in the event of wide-spread property destruction following an earthquake), some concerns and needs are universal following disaster, including:

- Basic survival
- Grief related to loss of loved ones or valued possessions
- Fear and anxiety related to personal/ physical safety
- A need to talk about events and feelings associated with the disaster
- A need to feel part of a community and its recovery efforts

## Coping with Crisis/ Disaster

Although reactions to disaster can cause significant discomfort, and even interfere with social, family, and occupational functioning, there are ways to deal with them and find comfort. These include:

- Talking about the experience with friends, family, or anyone understanding and supportive
- Getting involved in recovery/ relief efforts
- Maintaining a balanced diet and sleep cycle to keep up energy and immune system
- Avoiding drugs or excessive alcohol, which can actually impair coping over time
- Minimizing intake of stimulants like caffeine, nicotine, and sugar, which increase anxiety
- Participating in exercise like walking, jogging, cycling, or fitness classes
- Practicing meditation, prayer, guided imagery, and relaxation exercises
- Engaging in soothing activities
- Engaging in social activities to remain connected
- Finding meaningful and fulfilling activities
- Using music, art, or dance to express emotion
- Writing or journaling
- Allowing oneself permission to express strong emotions, including crying

## Support is the Key

Following a disaster, most people do not see themselves as needing counseling or support services, and do not seek such services. Despite the increased need for support, many disaster survivors reject assistance of all types. However, research has shown that social support—not only the support of trained professionals—is crucial to recovery. In other words, **anyone can be supportive following a disaster**, and that support, no matter how informal, can have a lasting, positive impact on a survivor's recovery.

## Families, Children, and Disaster

Children may respond differently to a crisis. Often, they will take cues from adults. It is helpful to talk with them and provide honest information based on their age-level of understanding. Most importantly, children need to know their family is available to support them. To be effective in their support, parents and caretakers must first practice good self-care. To enhance family and child recovery following disaster or crisis, parents can:

- Recognize their own feelings and share them
- Accept feelings of children without judgment
- Discuss factual information about the event in an age-appropriate manner
- Offer extra love and affection
- Accept help from others
- Take time off for family, if possible