

Stress has become more of a factor in all of our lives. Modern life has brought us many advances, but also new types of stress that our parents and grandparents never had to deal with. It is impossible to avoid stress, but we can all take steps to manage it in our lives.

Since September 11, 2001, we can no longer imagine a life sheltered from the threat of terror or disaster. The events of September 11 prompted the recognition that trauma in people's lives must be taken seriously and that we must take steps to understand what we can do to protect and respond to the demands and stresses of this new world.

The information in this pamphlet can help you and your family understand how everyday stress affects us all, and what the natural, human responses to extraordinary stress (like terrorism and disaster) are. It will show you how to better manage stress, understand what helps, and how to recognize when what you are feeling is more than a normal reaction. You will learn how you can get help if you need it to live and work the way you want to. Finally, this pamphlet contains practical tips about disaster preparedness and response.

### Stress is normal

To be human is to experience stress. In its strictest definition, stress is a physical and emotional reaction to change – whether the change is positive or negative. Most of us feel stressed every day, but are able to take it in stride. In fact, not all stress is bad – for example, buying a house, getting a job promotion, tackling a tough work assignment, and having a baby are all stressful, even though they are also positive life events. Stress becomes a problem when it involves feeling so much strain, pressure, or tension that you can't work and live comfortably.

It's important to know what the physical, emotional, and mental signs of "normal" or everyday stress are. It is perfectly natural to experience some of these signs to an extent – but if you are dealing with several of these signs at once, or for days at a time, you might need help with whatever is causing the stress.

- **Physical signs of stress include**– high blood pressure; loss of appetite or excess hunger; headaches, heartburn, diarrhea or constipation; sleep problems; muscle spasms or aches; shortness of breath; tightening in the throat or chest; feeling faint or nauseous; sexual problems; inability to sit still or excess energy; and the increased use of alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes.

- **Mental signs of stress include**– inability to concentrate or work effectively; difficulty completing work tasks; missing work or coming late.

- **Emotional signs of stress include**– arguments with co-workers; family conflicts; loss of interest in life or persistent boredom; feeling hopeless or unable to cope; persistent worries about health or security; feeling isolated; believing you have no one to turn to.

### When stress becomes extreme

Sometimes people are faced with stress beyond the normal and everyday stressors we all experience. Extreme stressors, which can have a traumatic effect on people, include being exposed to situations that are life threatening for themselves or their loved ones or witnessing others subjected to catastrophic events.

### Disaster or emergency

A natural disaster is caused by nature, though humans may tragically have lent a "helping hand." Natural disasters include fires, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and earthquakes. Human-made disasters include accidents, acts of terror, and the ravages of war. Financial problems and uncertainty, in a company or for an individual, can also create the conditions of a disaster when security is taken from us and everyday life is uprooted. It is normal to physically and emotionally react to extraordinary stress. But if your reaction feels very intense, is overwhelming to you, and worsens over a month or more, then ask your doctor or a mental health worker for help in feeling better.

*We can prepare for and try to prevent both natural and human-made disasters. We can also reduce their frequency and the degree of destruction.*

### What is terrorism?

Terrorism is an obvious example of an extreme stressor and one that we've unfortunately had to adjust to.

#### Terrorism:

- Is a dangerous or violent act or threat against human life or the stability of a community or society
- Aims to create fear, exact revenge, or get attention, and often seeks to destroy the functioning of a community or society
- Often seeks to wreak economic havoc
- Is a criminal act



### What are normal reactions to disaster?

Some people cope better with extreme stress than others due to what are called protective factors. Protective factors include being biologically "wired" to react temporarily to stress but then be able to return to normal; having individual personality traits of optimism, willfulness and persistence; having supportive people around and also being willing to turn to those people for support; and having faith or spiritual conviction.

There is no right or wrong way to react to extreme stressors like disaster or terrorism. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster or a trauma, people – even those with protective factors – experience a number of different reactions. If you have had to deal with disaster, you may have felt one or more of the following:

- Difficult or restless sleep
- Nightmares
- Mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating
- Restlessness
- Eating too little or too much
- Needing to talk about your experiences
- Numbness or lack of feeling

All of the above are normal as a temporary reaction to the extreme stress of a disaster or trauma. It is only when the reaction continues for weeks or longer, which can vary depending on the severity and personal impact of the disaster, that a person may need professional help to deal with the experience.

### After an emergency strikes

Remember that panic is rare and preventable. We have learned that people need and respond to timely, accurate information about what has happened and what they can expect and do. Steps you can take include the following:

- Try to stay calm
- Seek reliable information
- Follow the emergency procedures developed at your work-site or in your community
- Do not try to "go it alone"
- Talk about what to do and how you are feeling

- Recognize and respond to appropriate authority
- Get adequate nourishment and sleep
- Find opportunities to help others, if possible

It is important to remember that children also feel the effects of disaster. Young children may feel frightened or sad or clingy. They may ask very specific questions that seem simple and reflect their confusion about what has happened. Older children may feel anxious, angry, or sad. Some will have physical complaints of stomachaches or headaches. They may ask detailed questions to help them understand what has happened or why. Teenagers may wonder what this means and how it will affect their security, their everyday world, and their future.

### What are the effects of a traumatic event like a disaster?

Because we are all individuals, trauma affects us all differently. The effect of a trauma depends on a number of things, including how specifically and personally affected a person was (the degree of exposure to the event and how horrible the event was), whether a person has had to deal with trauma before, any personal vulnerability someone may have because of emotional problems in the past, and the availability of support from others and the ability to use it.

### How can you help yourself feel better?

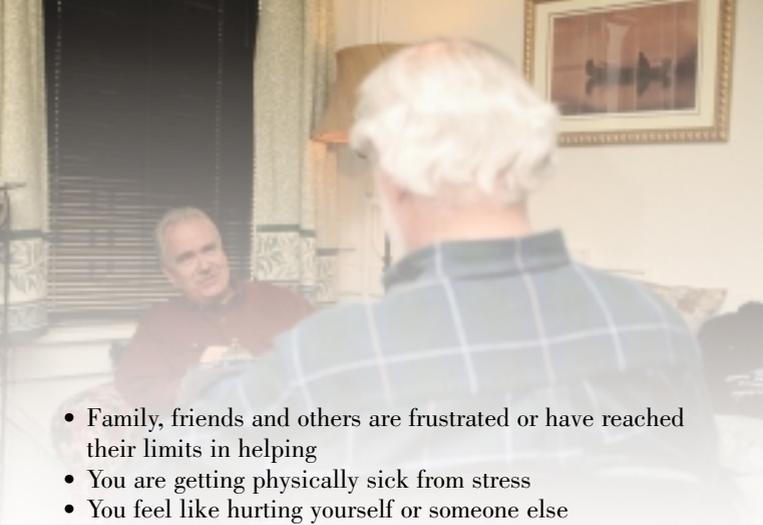
For most people, sharing feelings about the experience with others and talking about what happened helps. If you feel like talking with someone, it's a good idea to seek out friends, family, or even a professional counselor. Even though your reaction to a traumatic event might feel very intense in the days immediately afterward, the passage of time will help you get past those feelings. And as time goes by, you will feel better if you can put the experience into perspective, and even take meaning from it.

### How will you know if you need outside help?

It's possible to try all the suggested ways of feeling better and still have feelings and reactions to trauma that make you uncomfortable and unable to get back to normal. This may be happening if:

- Your suffering feels too great or lasts too long for you to stand it
- Your ability to work and live normally is very limited for days on end
- You are drinking too much or taking too much over-the-counter medication

Trauma that causes intense reactions in the days and weeks after an event may lead to **acute stress disorder**; if an intense reaction happens a month or more later, it may be **post-traumatic stress disorder**.



- Family, friends and others are frustrated or have reached their limits in helping
- You are getting physically sick from stress
- You feel like hurting yourself or someone else

## What can employers do after a traumatic event?

- Be sympathetic and sensitive about the event and the grief it caused
- Understand that trauma impacts individuals differently
- Speak with your employees as soon as possible, especially about safety and health issues
- Provide information and educational materials about what has happened, what to expect, and how individuals can take control
- Encourage and support communication among employees and with managers and company leadership
- Appreciate that employees may experience a short-term reduction in focus and productivity
- Educate managers and supervisors on signs of emotional distress and how to provide support and help
- Temporarily reconsider expectations about productivity, travel and time away from the office or workplace
- Provide ongoing communication until employees indicate the need has passed

## How to get professional help

Don't be ashamed to ask for help – it's not your fault and doesn't mean you're weak if you need assistance in getting back on track, at work or at home. The first step is to talk with your supervisor or manager or even a colleague. Employee Assistance Programs exist just for this purpose and can be very helpful while protecting your privacy. Check to see if your company offers this service. You might also contact the Occupational Health Program at work, if one exists.

Other helpful resources include your family doctor, a psychiatrist or other mental health professional, a local mental health center, your local hospital mental health clinic, or a mental health hotline.

Crisis and mental health counseling is available in almost every community.

## How to prepare for a disaster

### Create an emergency plan – at work and at home

- Meet with your co-workers and discuss roles and responsibilities
- Talk about an emergency plan with your family
- Discuss the types of emergencies that can occur
- Discuss how best to respond to different types of emergencies
- Contact security or building management representatives to learn emergency procedures (like fire drills) and evacuation plans
- Learn how best to safely leave your office or home, and practice it
- Learn how to call for emergency aid, and post numbers near telephones and in other prominent places
- Teach children how to call 911, the police and fire departments, and how to make a long distance call
- Learn how to turn off water, gas and electricity at main switches
- Learn how best to obtain information during an emergency (radio, TV), and post this with your emergency numbers
- Create a communications plan for an emergency – Who will call whom? How will you try to reach family and important others if normal communication channels are not working or are temporarily disrupted?
- Identify one or two meeting places, one in your neighborhood and one outside your neighborhood (in case you cannot return home after a disaster)

### Prepare a disaster kit to include

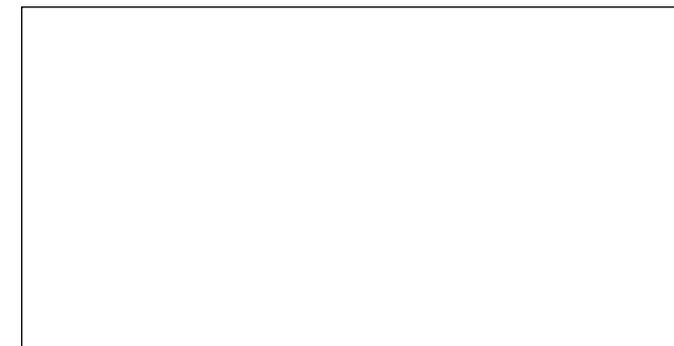
- A supply of water
- Non-perishable foods
- A change of clothing and comfortable clothes and shoes
- Blankets or sleeping bags
- A first aid kit
- Battery powered radio and flashlight and extra batteries
- A list of important phone numbers and email addresses (for family, friends, doctors)
- Cash and credit cards
- Medications prescribed by your doctor and extra eyeglasses

- Find out which disasters are typical for your community since many occur only in certain parts of the country (like earthquakes and tornadoes)
- Ask how to prepare for a disaster
- Ask how you would be warned about an emergency
- Learn about your community's resources
- For help in creating an emergency plan and checklist, contact your local American Red Cross chapter or your local Emergency Management Office of FEMA

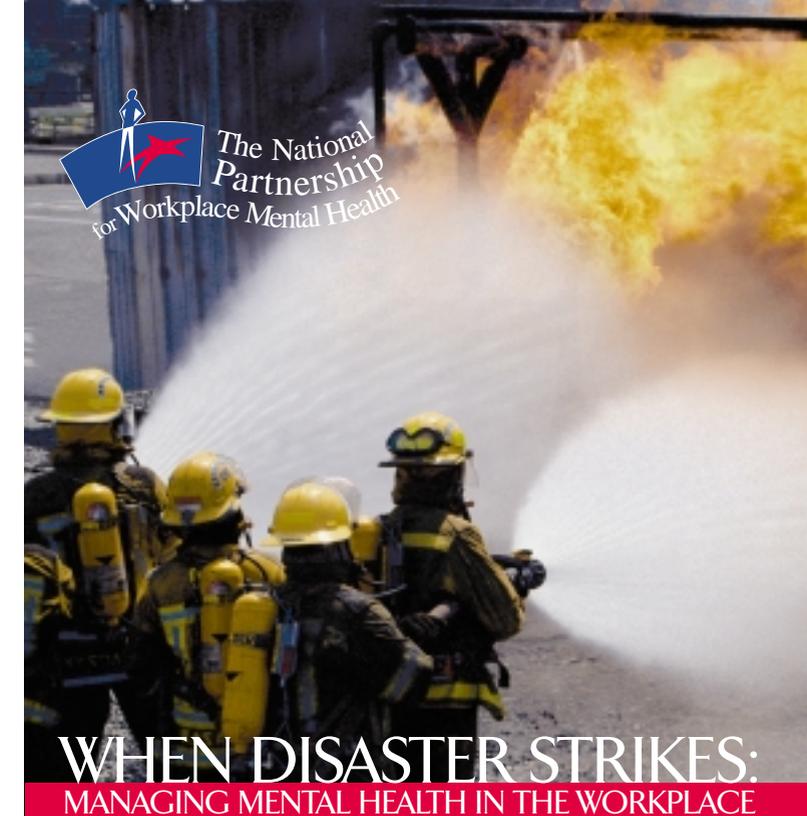


**The American Psychiatric Association and the following corporations, organizations, and federal government agencies have joined together to form *The National Partnership for Workplace Mental Health* to address mental health issues in the workplace. For more information, visit [www.workplacementalhealth.org](http://www.workplacementalhealth.org)**

Academy of Organizational and Occupational Psychiatry  
 AT&T  
 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
 Center for Mental Health Services  
 Coca-Cola Company  
 Constellation Energy Group  
 Delta Air Lines  
 Dow Chemical  
 DuPont  
 Employee Assistance Professionals Association  
 GlaxoSmithKline  
 Goldman Sachs  
 Hughes Electronics Corporation  
 IBP Corp  
 Johnson & Johnson  
 Merrill Lynch  
 National Association of Manufacturers  
 National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association  
 New York Mercantile Exchange  
 Screening For Mental Health  
 Society for Human Resource Management  
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## WHEN DISASTER STRIKES: MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE