

COPING WITH A DISASTER

Common Responses to a Disaster or a Traumatic Event

It's normal to have emotional and physical responses to traumatic events, such as the San Bruno fire. You or others may experience some of these in the weeks following the event. If you have been busy performing necessary tasks after the event, you may have a delay in your reactions until after you stop being busy. Here are some common responses and suggestions for how to help yourself or others.

Emotional

- Anxiety, fearfulness, restlessness, agitation
- Feelings of depression, sadness, moodiness, periods of crying
- Anger or irritability
- Feeling exhausted
- Feeling vulnerable, a loss of control
- Feeling overwhelmed or apathetic or numb—not able to get motivated
- Feelings of guilt about surviving and self-doubt
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Poor concentration, poor problem solving
- Slowness of thinking or attention, difficulty making decisions
- Disorientation or confusion
- Forgetfulness, memory problems
- Nightmares or intrusive images
- Limited attention span
- Low threshold of frustration
- Difficulty communicating thoughts
- Difficulty maintaining balance in your life
- Recurring thoughts or images of the event
- Strong desire to contact people who are important to you
- Recall of past traumas or losses
- Feeling excited and alive, or empty and depressed, both intermittently
- A re-evaluation of your life – what's important; what's not

Physical

- Headaches, nausea, upset stomach, feeling a “lump in the throat”
- Faintness or dizziness or chest pain (seek medical help)
- Fatigue, weakness, heavy feeling, increase in allergies, cold, flu, or flu-like symptoms
- Difficulty sleeping
- Loss or increase of appetite
- Tunnel vision/muffled hearing

Behavioral

- Hyperactivity, outbursts of anger or frequent arguments
- Withdrawal, social isolation
- Heighted response to loud noises, shouting or crying – easily startled
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, other drugs
- Avoidance of activities or places that arouse recollection of traumatic event
- Family problems
- Reluctance to leave home or fear of leaving loved ones
- Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone
- Poor work performance
- Discomfort in being in places that seem unsafe to you

TIPS FOR SELF-CARE WAYS TO HELP MANAGE YOUR STRESS

- Talk about your thoughts and feelings that keep returning with someone who is a good listener. Discuss the difficult parts. This helps you “let the steam out”, integrate, and move on from the experience. Be gentle with yourself. There will always be things you could have done differently. Also remember to discuss the positive contribution you made and the good that will come from your participation.
- Take it easy – don’t push yourself. Plan extra time to do usual tasks; you may not be able to function as efficiently as usual. Allow others to help with your tasks; you’re not the only one who can do it.
- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing by healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation, and meditation. Do some mild exercise –walking is great– be present, watch your breath, breathe deeply with long, slow exhalations. Let go and release tension and discomfort with each exhalation. See each inhalation as restoring yourself.
- Nurture and pamper yourself. Get plenty of rest. Allow yourself downtime and don’t push yourself. Take a leisurely hot bath, get a massage.
- Eat well and take your time. Avoid caffeine, fast foods, and sugar. Drink sufficient water. Avoid overeating.
- Accept whatever feeling you are having and recognize that others who were involved in the same incident may be on a different timetable of emotions. Be patient with yourself and others.
- Do not hold yourself responsible for the disastrous event or be frustrated because you feel you cannot help directly in the rescue work.
- Re-establish your normal family and daily routine as soon you can do so comfortably – this helps you regain a sense of stability and predictability.
- Spend time with family, friends and pets.
- Participate in memorials.
- Use existing support groups of family, friends, and religious institutions.
- Turn off your radio and television when the news is being broadcast when you start to feel overwhelmed by the news. Too much trauma exposure just increases the unease, promotes feeling overwhelmed and slows returning to normal. This is also good advice if you have children. The younger they are the less they should watch of the news.

- Find some release for what is inside. Write down your thoughts and feelings in journal, paint, draw, make music, or dance.
- If you are having trouble sleeping don't stay in bed for too long trying to fall asleep as this may just increase restlessness, anxiety and rumination. Instead get up, read a book, write in a journal, listen to some soothing music or watch an old favorite movie until you are sleepy.
- See a funny movie or play. Go to the theater. It is okay to laugh and enjoy yourself. Affirm life.
- Read an inspiring quote or religious passage. Maintain your spiritual practice.
- Don't immediately make major changes in your life – give yourself some time first. Check to see if your decision-making ability has been impaired (ask for feedback on now you're doing).
- Recognize that information about the event can be upsetting as well as helpful.
- Don't try to self medicate, numb out with ETOH or other agents. You will recover more quickly without them.
- Remember no one who responds to a disaster is untouched by it.
- Profound sadness, grief, and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Reach out to help others – either through volunteer activities, donations of money or supplies, personal support to friends and neighbors.
- Ensure you are ready for future events by restocking your disaster supplies kits and updating your family disaster plan. Doing these positive actions can be comforting.
- Seek professional assistance if you feel you are getting stuck with repeated thoughts or emotions about the experience or are having difficulty returning to your normal routine. Don't feel bad about asking for help; it is not uncommon to have some reaction after this type of experience and remember it usually passes.

IF YOU NEED TALK TO SOMEONE, CONTACT:

**SAN MATEO COUNTY HEALTH SYSTEM
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH and RECOVERY SERVICES
ACCESS TEAM
1-800-686-0101**