

## HOW DO I DEAL WITH MY FEELINGS?

Disasters create an abrupt change in reality. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, for thousands and thousands of people, reality now includes the loss of loved ones — spouses, significant others, children, other relatives, friends, and neighbors.

For the millions of people around the world connected to this tragedy only by media coverage, it means the loss of a measure of security and safety and invulnerability. For people who have lived through military actions, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the first World Trade Center disaster, this event brings back memories and emotions they had thought they had dealt with.

This information was prepared in order to help you recognize the emotions, feelings, and physical symptoms you may be experiencing, and to offer some ways in which you may reduce the stress and begin the healing process. Be assured that the following are very normal reactions to an abnormal event.

### COMMON REACTIONS

- **Shock, numbness, and disbelief** that such a thing could happen.
- **Fear** concerning personal safety, the safety of loved ones, and the country as a whole. There is also fear about the safety of the fire, police, and search and rescue personnel.
- **Grief** for all those who lost their lives and for those who are having to deal with the aftermath of the destruction; and, for many, a reappearance of grief over previous losses. This reappearance may also include losses suffered during World War II — the last time the United States was attacked — any military action or response to terrorist activity since then, or to any other type of violent event. It is very important to understand that grieving is a natural outcome of such an event. The grieving may last for an extended period, especially when the event is still being discussed and is the subject of constant media coverage. The phrase “we are at war” heard repeatedly on television and radio contributes to this feeling.
- **Flashbacks.** Anyone who suffered post-traumatic stress disorder from a previous incident may have the symptoms return as a result of this violence. This is especially true of victims of violent acts, especially, in this circumstance, war; but it is also true for victims of domestic abuse and crime.
- **Anger and increased suspicion of others.** Immediate anger, even rage, may be felt toward the specific human beings who hijacked the planes. This anger and suspicion can quickly become generalized toward others who are thought to be members of the same culture or nationality and/or religion. Remember, we are still unsure of the identity of the people who conceived and initiated the attack, and that they were individuals and do not represent everyone from their culture, their nation, or their faith
- **Guilt.** Survivor guilt is a feeling of “why am I alive when others are not,” or “if only I had ...” Belief in our ability to affect outcomes and to make a difference is a part of who we are. It’s hard to believe that events are random and that we have no influence over them. Types of survivor guilt include —
  - Thinking that different behavior could have changed the outcome. People who were able to escape from the World Trade Center may feel that they could have done more to save others.
  - Worrying about unresolved issues with a person who died. The survivor focuses on the days or hours just before the disaster and feels guilty about possible negligence, disagreements, misunderstandings, arguments or unkind words. The survivor often feels that the person died without knowing he or she was loved.



Disaster Services

- Feeling guilty and helpless because there was no opportunity to do anything. This is common to “secondary victims” (people whose exposure to the disaster is only through media reports) but who feel helpless that they can do nothing to lessen the effects of the disaster. This is also common to search and rescue personnel who, if there were no survivors, had no opportunity to use their training and expertise.
- **Feeling overwhelmed, having difficulty making decisions, and/or an inability to think clearly.** These strong emotions can lead to feelings of being stuck in place and unable to make plans and carry out every day chores.
- **Temporary memory loss.** Both your short and long-term memory can be temporarily affected by sensory and information overload. You may experience an inability to remember names or dates for example, or find that even when you walk just from room to room in your home that you have forgotten what you wanted to do when you got where you were going.
- **Need to contact family members.** Not only do you want to be sure that everyone knows that you are all right, but there is a need to reach out and touch those whom you love and who love you. The connection with your support system is very important in managing your stress.
- **Need for information.** Everyone is glued to their televisions and radios, hoping to hear that survivors have been found, that the country is considered safe, whether we know who was behind this attack, and if there is anything that each of us as an individual can do to help. This is a major factor in continued high levels of stress because there is no time for the body or mind to relax.
- **Anxiety.** Anxiety is different from fear. Anxiety is a general uneasiness or worry, like waiting for the other shoe to drop.
- **Depression.** Depression is characterized by —
  - Crying for no apparent reason.
  - Frustration and feelings of powerlessness.
  - Moodiness and irritability.
  - Feelings of hopelessness.
  - Isolating yourself from your family and friends and/or social activities.

As a result of any or a combination of several of the above, you may experience physical problems such as:

- Appetite changes and/or digestion problems.
- Sleeping problems. Most common is the inability to fall asleep or stay asleep. For a period of time you may also have nightmares. You may also find that you are sleeping more.
- Headaches.
- Increased allergies, colds, and flu.
- Weight loss.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF AND OTHERS

- **Reduce the fuel.** High levels of anxiety fueled by watching TV, listening to the radio, and reading about the disaster can be lowered by limiting your exposure to the sights and sounds of the disaster. This is probably the single most effective thing you can do at this time to help yourself. Try only watching news reports at the beginning of the hour when they summarize the news, and try doing this only every two, three or four hours.
- **Focus on the positive.** Think about the courage and commitment of the responders — police, fire, EMS, and search and rescue professionals; doctors, nurses, and other medical staff; mental health professionals, Red Cross and other voluntary agency staff, and the hundred of thousands of spontaneous volunteers. Remember that these are people of all nationalities, faiths, and cultures who have worked tirelessly to stand with and for those affected.
- **Recognize your own feelings.** Knowing that the physical and emotional problems you are having are stress related helps to reduce their effect on you. It helps to know that this is a shared experience.
- **Talk to others about your feelings.** Understand that they are shared by millions of people around the world. This will help relieve your stress and help you realize that other victims share your feelings.
- **Accept help from others.** If you need help putting your feelings in perspective, talk to a mental health worker. They are trained in crisis intervention, and know that reactions of this type are normal and usual following this type of event. *This does not mean that you are crazy.* What it does mean is that your coping skills are being stretched.
- **Deal with your anger.** Do not take out your anger on your family. Unresolved anger often turns into spouse or child abuse, and that isn't at all what you want. Strenuous physical activity is one way to deal with anger. Take a brisk walk, go for a run, scrub a floor, or clean house. If you want to hit something, hit a baseball or a tennis ball or a racquetball; kick a football or a soccer ball. If you are unable to do those things when you feel the anger, try using stress reducing techniques such as deep breathing exercises or meditation. Don't allow your anger to grow into hate.
- **Reach out.** Offer to listen to others who need to talk. Most especially, if you are able, reach out and embrace those who are being blamed for the acts of the terrorists just because they share a nationality or religion. Their grief and pain is as great as yours, and their feelings of guilt much greater. At the very least, do not condemn the many for the acts of the few.
- **Do something you enjoy.** Whenever possible, take a few minutes to look out the window at the sunshine and the flowers. Remember that you are still free and that there is still beauty in the world. It's OK to smile; in fact, it's good for you, will make you feel better, and in no way is disrespectful.
- **Stay connected with your usual support systems.** Stay in touch with your religious/spiritual leader, social groups, neighbors, family, and friends. Spend a night with a friend or a family member. You can both benefit from the contact.

**If you need someone to talk to, please feel free to contact the American Red Cross in your local area. They will be happy to help arrange for you to talk to a specially trained disaster mental health professional.**