

MANAGING STRESS FROM WORLDWIDE TRAUMATIC EVENTS

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The world is watching the unfolding of the ongoing, devastating effects of an earthquake that occurred in Japan last week. Due to the fact that we have live, instant news, we are seeing real time images that may be horrifying to us. We collectively have fears for the people in Japan and for ourselves. We have created this informational flyer for you to read which can help you to manage the stress you may be feeling.

Both Academic Counseling and Student Health Services are able to support your needs if you feel you need to talk with someone on a more personal level.

Disasters are often unexpected, sudden, and overwhelming. In some cases, there are no outwardly visible signs of physical injury, but there is nonetheless a serious emotional toll. It is common for people who have experienced traumatic situations to have very strong emotional reactions. Understanding normal responses to these abnormal events can aid you in coping effectively with your feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and help you along the path to recovery.

What happens to people after a disaster or other traumatic event?

- Shock and denial are typical responses to traumatic events and disasters, especially shortly after the event. Both shock and denial are normal protective reactions.
- Shock is a sudden and often intense disturbance of your emotional state that may leave you feeling stunned or dazed. Denial involves you not acknowledging that something very stressful has happened, or not experiencing fully the intensity of the event. You may temporarily feel numb or disconnected from life.
- As the initial shock subsides, reactions vary from one person to another. The following, however, are normal responses to a traumatic event:
- Feelings become intense and sometimes are unpredictable. You may become more irritable than usual, and your mood may change back and forth dramatically. You might be especially anxious or nervous, or even become depressed.
- Thoughts and behavior patterns are affected by the trauma. You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event. These flashbacks may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused. Sleep and eating patterns also may be disrupted.
- Physical symptoms may accompany the extreme stress. For example, headaches, nausea and chest pain may result and may require medical attention. Pre-existing medical conditions may worsen due to the stress.

How do people respond differently over time?

It is important for you to realize that there is not one 'standard' pattern of reaction to the extreme stress of traumatic experiences. Some people respond immediately, while others have delayed reactions sometimes months or even years later. Some have adverse effects for a long period of time, while others recover rather quickly.

How should I help myself and my family?

There are a number of steps you can take to help restore emotional well being and a sense of control following a disaster including the following:

- Recognize that this is a challenging time but one that you can work to manage. You've tackled hardships at other times in your life. Tap into the skills you used to get through past challenges.
- Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathize with your situation. But keep in mind that your typical support system may be weakened if those who are close to you also have experienced or witnessed the trauma.
- Communicate your experience in whatever ways feel comfortable to you such as by talking with family or close friends, or keeping a diary.
- Group discussion can help people realize that other individuals in the same circumstances often have similar reactions and emotions.
- Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.
- Avoid major life decisions such as switching careers or jobs if possible because these activities tend to be highly stressful.

What about all the stuff I am reading on the internet? Where can I find reliable information?

- Go the website for the County of San Diego Office of Emergency Services for reliable up-to-date information at <http://www.co.san-diego.ca.us/oes/> . Relying on internet blogs and random news can increase your anxiety and worry. Please try to find your news from reliable sources.
- Some people are concerned about exposure to radiation from the nuclear power plant explosion in Japan. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission provides guidance at: <http://www.nrc.gov/public-involve/listserver.html>.
- Sites on the internet are talking about people taking potassium iodide (K1) because of the nuclear reactor disaster in Japan. Taking K1 is not recommended unless there is verified risk of exposure to radioactive iodine. This means that you should refer to the San Diego County Office of Emergency Services website for up-to-date information that is reliable. Their website is at <http://www.co.san-diego.ca.us/oes/>.

Information on this flyer is from the American Psychological Association website and Mesa College Student Health Services.