



the portage path behavioral health reference guide to: **Coping with Tragedy**

Coping with a tragedy can spark a full range of emotions - often shock and disbelief, followed by grief and then often anger. They cause you to question a number of things that you previously believed about your safety, the safety of your family and friends, and moral issues between right and wrong behaviors. It is important to know that this is a normal reaction to a disaster caused by another human being, and it is even more important that you give yourself time to sort out your feelings and thoughts.

According to the American Red Cross, disasters caused by human hands are more difficult to overcome than natural disasters, such as earthquakes and volcanoes. For the following reasons:

Common Reactions To Traumatic Events

- Flashbacks, or nightmares
- Inability to think clearly
- Temporary memory loss
- Need for information.
- Need to contact family members.
- Shock, numbness, and disbelief
- Anger and increased suspicion of others.
- Fear concerning personal safety, the safety of loved ones, and country.
- Feelings of guilt for being alive when others are not.
- Feelings of grief for those who lost their lives.

- **LACK OF WARNING.** If we can prepare for something, even a disaster, the event is less frightening than if we have no warning.
- **ABRUPT CHANGE IN REALITY.** A safe area suddenly becomes unsafe.
- **TYPES OF DESTRUCTIVE AGENTS USED.** The power of a bomb or gun or whatever was used to harm others is frightening. In this disaster, the use of a common means of safe transportation is very upsetting.
- **FEAR OF ADDITIONAL DESTRUCTION.** We don't know what will happen so we are in a state of alert.
- **OUTCOME OF RESCUE ATTEMPTS.** Fears that no one or few people will be found alive or that the rescue crews, themselves, can be hurt.
- **TRAUMA ASSOCIATED WITH SEEING DEATH SO CLOSE AT HAND.** Seeing the dead and critically injured is especially disturbing.
- **FEELINGS THAT THERE SHOULD HAVE BEEN SOME WAY TO PREVENT SUCH A DISASTER FROM HAPPENING.**
- **MEDIA COVERAGE.** Anyone who watches the disaster coverage can become what is called a "Secondary Victim" and can suffer emotional and physical problems.

Feelings of numbness, shock, sadness, and anger are normal reactions to tragedies. For some people their anxiety may develop into a full-blown disorder known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a psychiatric disorder that can occur following the experience or witnessing of a life-threatening event. People who suffer from PTSD often relive the experience through nightmares and flashbacks, have difficulty sleeping, and feel detached or estranged. In most cases, symptoms often impair everyday functioning.



When Should I Seek Professional Help?

A person who has witnessed a traumatic event and is experiencing symptoms of PTSD that are interfering with everyday life - should contact their family doctor, or a mental health professional immediately. According to Sara Stein, M.D., "Addressing the trauma very quickly will interrupt situations, such as survivor grief or guilt. Immediate help can also reduce the risk of avoidance behaviors."

Treatment for PTSD typically begins with a detailed evaluation, and development of a treatment plan that meets the unique needs of the survivor. The most common treatment modalities include education, exposure, exploration of feelings and beliefs, and coping skill training. Mental health professionals can help a person deal with their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that result from a traumatic experience.



How Should I Help Myself and My Family?

- by the American Psychology Association web site (www.apa.org)

- Give yourself time to heal. Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. 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.
- Find out about local support groups that often are available such as for those who have suffered from natural disasters, or for women who are victims of rape.
- Try to find groups led by appropriately trained and experienced professionals.
- Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. Avoid using alcohol or drugs.
- Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program.
- Avoid major life decisions such as switching careers or jobs if possible because these activities tend to be highly stressful.
- Become knowledgeable about what to expect as a result of trauma.

If you have identified with the issues discussed in this flyer and you're ready to take the next step toward feeling better, visit our web site or call Portage Path and find out how we can help:

Web Site www.portagepath.org

Appointments 330-253-3100
800-828-4508

If you feel you're in emotional crisis and you need someone to talk to, call our free 24-hour, 7-day crisis hotline:

Support Hotline 330-434-9144
888-434-8878



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