

Call us at (713) 500-3327 or toll free (800) 346-3549



Emotional recovery after a crisis resource guide

Please note: This guidebook offers general information only. It's critical to follow specific instructions from your local authorities in the event of a crisis.

If your life has been turned upside-down by a crisis or if you just want to be ready for anything, this guidebook can help.

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Emotional recovery

After a crisis, it can be hard to take care of your basic needs. Emotional recovery can take time, effort and patience.

People are often surprised at the emotions that come up during this time. And they may not connect outside stressors with their feelings. It's normal to have a lot of feelings all at once. You might feel fear, concern for safety, shock, disbelief, depression, anger and guilt.

All these feelings can lead to other stress symptoms. These can include:

- Memory problems
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Insomnia
- Lack of appetite

Some people may be at a higher risk for stress. Children, older adults, those with disabilities or those for whom English is not their native language may face even more intense struggles. Children may become afraid and clingy. Some may act younger or lose skills, like toilet training. Older adults may be disoriented at first. Those with disabilities may require extra help and attention for a while.

Early stress symptoms often fade over time after the event. But if they don't, or if they get worse, you may want to call to get help.



Coping with acute stress

Everyone who sees or experiences a crisis is affected by it in some way. Even those who only see it through the media can have serious emotional and stress reactions.

When a crisis occurs, natural or otherwise, the emotional stress and damage can be long-lasting. The emotional impact is often greater than the event.

After a crisis, it can help to remember:

- It's normal to feel anxious about your own safety and that of your family and close friends.
- Profound sadness, grief and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Accepting your feelings helps with recovery.
- Focusing on your strengths and abilities helps you heal.
- Getting help from community programs and resources is healthy.
- Everyone has different needs and different ways of coping.

Easing your stress

- Talk with someone about your feelings. It's normal and okay to feel anger, sorrow and other emotions.
- Don't hold yourself responsible for the disastrous event. And remember, not everyone can help directly with the rescue work. You can still find ways to help.

- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing. Eat healthy. Rest. Exercise. Relax. Spend time in meditation or other activities that keep you calm.
- Try to return to some kind of normal routine. This provides a sense of some control. It's also helpful for children involved.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- You can participate in memorials if you feel that's right for you. Be willing also to give yourself permission NOT to attend or participate if you feel this would be in your best interest.
- Lean on your support groups. For example, you can ask for help from family, friends, community and religious institutions.
- Ensure you're ready for any future emergencies.

Your top concern after a crisis is your family and loved ones. To gain a sense of control over your life and situation:

- Limit your media exposure
- Keep your routines consistent
- Seek professional help for yourself and/or loved ones who are suffering in body, mind or spirit.

Bad things happen, natural and otherwise, but there are organizations and people you can turn to for help.



Reactions to crisis

A crisis can overwhelm your senses. Once it's over, you might feel like things should return to "normal" right away. But it can take time to process a crisis. By knowing what to expect, you can start to heal.

During a crisis, it's normal to go into survival mode. This is especially true if it involved death, injury or a threat to one's safety. Just as the body may go into shock because of an injury, it's normal for people to feel an emotional shock after a crisis.

People respond to trauma in their own way. Know that there's no "right" way to react. Your feelings are your own. You could face:

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Sadness
- Grief
- Intense mood swings
- Numb feelings
- Isolation
- Fear of being alone
- Sleep problems
- Guilt
- Memories of past traumas
- Problems with focus and/or memory
- Thinking about the event over and over
- Confused thinking

- Trouble making decisions

Don't be surprised if your reactions change. You might go from feeling numb to feeling despair. That's normal. Your brain is trying to keep you from having emotional overload.

Also, it's normal to get focused on safety matters. You could find yourself thinking a lot about keeping yourself and others safe. This is a normal response right after a trauma. Many people blame themselves, even if the event was outside of their control. These feelings might make you feel confused or out of control. But know they can be resolved with time and healing. If you find you're not feeling better after some time, you should seek help with a counselor or you can call us to seek help 24/7. Sometimes, we can all use some extra support. You don't have to heal on your own.

Most of all, know that going through a crisis can change you. Take the time to find meaning in the crisis and get to know yourself again.



Beliefs turned upside down

A crisis can challenge beliefs we take for granted. Most of us go about our lives feeling as if our world is a safe place. We often feel as if we're in control.

We tend to have the notion that bad things don't happen to good people. After a crisis, you may find yourself questioning everything. You may feel unsafe. This can make you act more carefully (or "hyper-vigilant").

Basic beliefs

Before a traumatic event

- Life is predictable
- My world is safe

After a traumatic event

- I am in control
- Good things happen to good people

- I don't know what might happen
- I'm scared and feel vulnerable
- I've lost control
- Bad things can happen to good people

Stressful events affect each person differently. When there's a crisis, almost everyone will have some kind of stress symptom. Sometimes reactions appear right after the event. Sometimes they appear a few hours or a few days later. In some cases, weeks or months may pass before they appear. No matter what, know there isn't a "right" way to feel after a trauma.

Acute stress symptoms can last days, weeks, months or longer. It may depend on the event. With the support of friends and loved ones, stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Sometimes a counselor can help, too. This doesn't imply "craziness" or weakness.

When you're in survival mode, it can be hard to make choices. To help you gain a sense of control, make as many daily decisions as possible. But give yourself time to make major ones. Big decisions are best made after you've regained some sense of balance.



What can I do after a crisis?

A lot of times, a crisis is out of our control. Our reactions to the crisis, while normal, can be confusing. And this can make us feel even more powerless. The good news is, you have control over how you handle your feelings.

The way you choose to cope can help you to heal. It's normal to want to avoid your feelings. But this avoidance can delay your recovery. The only way to get through this time is to go through it. Let yourself experience your feelings so you can work through them.

If you don't know how to manage your reactions, we suggest you try some of these steps:

1. Get your feelings out. Think of a balloon. It can only hold so much air before it pops. It's important for you to let "air" out of your emotional balloon. Talking, journaling or doing something artistic can help relieve your stress.
2. Talk about what happened and how you feel about it. Telling your story can help you find meaning in it.

3. Accept the concern and care of others.
4. Reach out to your family and close friends. It can be tempting to withdraw from others. Even if you sit in silence, it's important to be with loved ones.
5. Eat well. More than ever, your body needs nourishment. If you can only pick at your food, a vitamin might be helpful. It may be tempting, but try to avoid emotional eating.
6. Avoid using alcohol or drugs. People often use substances to run away from their feelings. This can slow your recovery or add to your problems.
7. Acknowledge support from your co-workers. Talk about how your reactions may affect your work and how you can help one another.
8. If the crisis involved the loss of life, consider attending the funeral or memorial service. Go with someone you know, perhaps someone who also went through the crisis. But give yourself permission to stay home if you feel it's the best thing for you.
9. Avoid self-criticism. This is a time for healing, not blaming.
10. Take some positive action in your own life. Identify your goals and do things that make you feel good about yourself.
11. Exercise. It can help manage stress and clear your mind.
12. Remember, your reactions are likely to be shared by others. They are a sign of your ability to care.



Stages of recovery from trauma and loss

We like to make sense of things. During times of stress, this feels even more important. Knowing about the different stages of grief can help you feel “normal.” It can help to find order in a time of confusion.

Stages of recovery aren’t perfect or universal. We don’t all go through them in the same order. We may not even go through all the stages. The most important thing is to let yourself grieve in your own way.

These stages outline how we often experience a crisis. You may not go through these stages in order and you may find yourself returning to earlier stages.

Stage 1—Shock, denial and disbelief

- The mind argues the crisis isn't real or can be reversed
- Feelings go numb
- Life feels like a dream
- This stage gives you time to take in the situation
- Expect ups and downs in the healing process

What to do:

- Feel the pain (pain is proof you're human and starting to heal)
- Remember the greater the hurt, the more time you may need to heal
- Give yourself extra rest, sleep and relaxation
- Expect the healing process will be hard and will take time •
If possible, keep regular schedules and routines

Stage 2 – Anger and depression

- Feelings of pain start to come out
- Crying and sadness are common
- Blaming is normal
- Anger may be directed at those who don't hurt as much as you
- Thinking can become confused and unfocused
- Despair may be felt for a short time



What to do:

- Beware of the "If onlys..." if they become painful
- Put off major decisions during this time
- Reach out to people you trust. Talk to a counselor if you feel alone
- Realize that anger is okay. It's what you do with it that matters
- Allow yourself time to mourn
- Seek help if you have suicidal thoughts
- Avoid stressful situations
- Do positive activities that make you feel good about yourself

Stage 3 – Understanding and accepting

- Feel peace with the emotional pain you suffered
- Accept what has happened
- Let go of what might have been
- Allow yourself feelings of hope

- Find meaning in the crisis
- Look toward the future

What to do:

- Develop new coping skills and begin to put your life back together
- Let go of the guilt, pain and resentment through forgiveness
- Discover the “new you”
- Transform the loss into a new opportunity
- Laugh – it’s often a good, strong medicine



Helping children cope with a crisis

Children often copy their parent's behavior. When parents deal with a situation well, there's a good chance their children will also cope in a healthy way. When problems are kept hidden, children may fear something bad is going on.

Often they'll imagine it's even worse than it really is.

Be aware that after a crisis, children are *most afraid*:

- The event will happen again
- Someone will be injured or killed
- They'll be separated from their family
- They'll be left alone

Here are several tips for parents to help children cope:

- Express extra love and affection to your child
- Reassure your child you are safe. Emphasize that you're still together as a family.

- Limit TV and other exposure to the crisis. For younger children, keep the TV off during news and crisis coverage.
- Encourage children to talk about their feelings. As you listen, be sure not to judge. Help younger children learn to put their feelings into words. But don't make them talk about the situation if they don't want to. Give them time.
- Be willing to share your feelings. Make sure to use terms they can understand.
- Don't ignore the reality of what's happened. Talk about it. This models healthy behavior. It also validates that what they're going through is real and can be hard to deal with.
- Let children and teens know it's normal to feel upset after something bad happens. Tell them these feelings may last a while.
- Let children cry or be sad. Don't expect them to be brave or tough.
- Don't criticize children if they act as they did when they were younger.
- Don't shame your child with words like "babyish."
- Spend extra time with your child at bedtime.
- Let children grieve for what they've lost. Whether those things are small, like a toy or a blanket, or big, like their home.
- Find some extra time to spend together in a family activity. Together you can begin to replace fears with more pleasant memories.
- If your child is having problems at school, talk to the teacher so you can work together to help your child.
- Take care of yourself. That will help you take care of your children.

The importance of daily routines

Daily routines can make children feel safe. They wake up, eat breakfast, go to school and play with friends. When there's a change in their routine, children may become anxious.

In the midst of what may be big changes to your life, try to create some kind of a routine. This helps provide a sense of structure and safety for children. It can give you a feeling of control.



Parents can provide keys to coping

In a crisis, children will look to you and other adults for help. How you react to an emergency gives them clues for how to act. You want to role model healthy ways of coping. If you focus on the fear and pain, children may become even more scared and anxious. If you focus on loss, they might feel their losses even more acutely.

You don't want to deny the reality and the difficulty of what's occurred. But you can still help your children see you're taking care of them and moving forward. The key is being able to strike a balance and role model how to cope.

Children's fears may also stem from their imagination. You should take these feelings seriously. A child who feels fear *is* afraid. Your words and actions can provide comfort. Be sure to answer questions honestly. But focus more on solutions than on problems.

Feelings of fear are healthy and natural. But as an adult, you need to stay calm. When you're sure the danger has passed, focus on your child's emotional needs.

- Try asking your child what's on his or her mind. This lets your child give voice to feelings and experiences.
- Correct any mistaken perceptions. This can help put your child's mind at ease.
- Have children participate in the family's recovery activities. Doing so can help them feel their lives will return to "normal." And it can help give a sense of control and hope.

Sometimes these situations can be traumatic. This is especially true for those who see people getting hurt. Talking to a professional can help children cope with that trauma. Take steps to ensure your child copes in the healthiest manner possible. And be sure you're coping in a healthy way, too.



Helping children grieve

Depending on their age, children don't always express grief in the same ways as grown-ups. Younger children might not fully understand. Teens might feel loss even more intensely than adults in the family.

Here are some ways you can help your children during times of loss:

- Set aside time each day to spend some one-on-one time with your children. Give them your full attention. Listen to what they have to say.
- Acknowledge and deal with your feelings about the loss so you can be emotionally available to your children.
- Be willing to talk about the feelings you're going through. Just be careful not to dwell on them. This models healthy coping skills. Reassure your children that they're not at fault for the feelings you have. And let them know they're not responsible for helping you change them.
- The words you use and the feelings you express can shape your child's concept of loss and recovery for many years to come. Allowing them to grieve in a healthy manner is a wonderful gift. It can serve them well through the toughest times ahead in their lives.
- Use this opportunity to teach the concept of community.

- Consider allowing children to attend any funeral services that would be appropriate. This decision should be made according to what you feel your child(ren) can understand and handle. Attending the funeral can provide an opportunity to say goodbye. But they shouldn't be pressured into going if they don't want to.
- Schedule time for the family to be together. Children gain comfort from being close with their families around times of loss.
- Encourage non-verbal expressions of grief. Listen to music. Create a dance. Draw pictures. Collect stones or leaves. These are just a few ideas.
- Encourage physical exercise and other physical activities. Being physically active can help the healing process.
- Encourage your children to use all their support systems. That includes talking to their friends about what's happened.
- Holidays and various anniversaries can be especially tough. Look for extra ways to validate and express grief during these times.
- If needed, seek professional help for your child to help them through this time. There are several types of therapy especially for children that can be very helpful.

Pay special attention to:

- Apathy and withdrawal from family and friends
- Signs of alcohol or drug use/abuse
- A drop in school performance
- Preoccupation with or idealizing violence or death
- Unusually good behavior and a relentless need to please
- Any mention of suicidal thoughts

What can be expected from various age groups

Pre-school and early primary students (3-6 years old)

- Children this age tend to be "me" centered.
- This age group also uses "magical thinking." They may think something they thought or did actually caused the event.

- Death is seen as reversible. A child this age may think there is something he or she can do to bring the person back.
- Children may complain of physical symptoms like tummy aches. These can be signs that there's a need for nurturing. But be sure not to dismiss them without checking with a doctor, too.



Mid-primary years to pre-teen (6-12 years old)

- Children in this age bracket may regress to earlier behavior or misbehave.
- Hyperactivity may signal a wish to escape feelings they don't know how to deal with. Or feelings that scare them.
- As with younger children, they may exhibit physical symptoms, reflecting a need for nurturing. But be sure not to dismiss them without checking with a doctor, too.
- A child in this age group has some understanding of the concept of death.

Teen years (13-19 years old)

- In the teens, abstract concepts and feelings about death and an afterlife are developing.
- There may also be tendencies to idealize or romanticize things, making grief more intense.
- As with younger children, teens may also exhibit physical symptoms, reflecting a need for additional attention. But be sure not to dismiss them without checking with a doctor, too.
- Teens tend to be particularly vulnerable to peer reactions to a situation or an event.
- Feelings of anger, guilt and depression can be significantly magnified for teenagers.



Helping a grieving co-worker

It can be hard to see someone hurting. You might wonder what to do. Maybe you're afraid of saying the wrong thing. Here are some tips on how to respond.

What you can do to help

1. **Be present.** There is a power in just being near. Send an email saying you're thinking of your co-worker. If your co-worker gets upset, stay and sit with him or her.
2. **Listen.** You don't need to fix the situation. In fact, offering solutions may not be what your co-worker needs. Allow your co-worker to talk while you listen without judgment.
3. **Accept your co-worker's feelings, concerns and actions.** You may not agree with your co-worker's response. Set aside your opinion so you can validate your co-worker's feelings.
4. **Show support.** It's hard to know what to say when somebody has experienced a loss or has gone through a crisis. Here are some examples of what you can say:
 - "I'm sorry for your loss"
 - "I'm sorry you had to go through that"
 - "I can't imagine what that was like"
 - "This must be so hard"
 - "I don't know what to say"
5. **Be patient.** Have patience with any displays of moodiness, expressions of anger, pain, disbelief or guilt. It's not personal and it's not about you. Be sensitive to the fact that people grieve differently and there's no schedule for healing.

6. **Provide practical help.** It's okay to ask your co-worker what he or she needs. Here are some suggestions of how you might help:
- Send a card or flowers
 - Prepare and deliver a meal
 - Offer to give a ride
 - Offer to run an errand
 - Invite your co-worker to lunch or coffee
 - Recognize anniversaries and other important dates
 - Babysit for a day
 - Offer to make phone calls
 - Just listen

Things to avoid

It can be awkward to see a co-worker grieving. It can bring up our own issues. Sometimes we try to help, but it comes out wrong. Here are some things that don't help someone going through a loss:

1. **Withdrawing from your co-worker.** Going through a major loss can feel lonely. Don't ignore your co-worker or pretend the loss did not occur. You can acknowledge the loss with a simple "I'm sorry."
2. **Telling the person how to grieve.** Allow your co-worker to attach his or her own meaning to the loss. The following statements are often said with good intent. But they're generally *not* helpful when a person is grieving:
 - "Everything will be alright"
 - "It's God's will"
 - "They are in a better place now"
 - "Everything happens for a reason"
 - "Look at all you have to be thankful for"
 - "It could be worse"
 - "At least he/she did not suffer"
 - "He/She had a good life"
 - "You have to be strong"
 - "Don't think about it"
 - "You have to get on with your life"
3. **Comparing losses or expecting sympathy for yourself.** You may have been through a similar situation as your co-worker. Avoid saying things like, "I know how you feel" or "I understand." People respond to grief in their own way. If you find you need to talk about your own loss, talk to a therapist or a trusted friend – not your coworker.
4. **Patronizing your co-worker.** Do not imply your co-worker is helpless in handling the situation.



(Excerpted from Beyond Grief, by Carol Staudacher, New Harbinger Publications, 1987)



Resources

If you want to learn more about the emotional side of crisis recovery, consider these resources:

- Your Employee Assistance Program
- Psychological First Aid <http://www.nctsn.org/content/psychological-first-aid>
- Coping With Trauma, Second Edition: Hope Through Understanding by Jon G. Allen
- Mental health resources following a trauma: www.samhsa.gov/trauma
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.nctsn.net

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