



Personal responses to disaster

Sometimes it helps to understand how people respond to disaster. For people immediately affected this can help to work your way through the grief and loss process. Below are some of the responses people can have to disaster. Some people may have few or many of these. Getting over them takes time but usually results in personal growth and increased maturity

Short-term responses

Although people rarely lose control, in the days following the disaster they may have difficulty with planning, decision-making, setting priorities or anticipating future needs. They may feel disoriented, confused or uncertain about the future. Emotional reactions may be postponed or displaced onto apparently unimportant things.

Medium-Term Responses (weeks to months)

In the weeks and months after the disaster, people may go through a wide range of emotions, including shock, fear, grief, sadness, anger, uncertainty and insecurity about the future. There are also strong feelings of altruism, togetherness and concern. It is a time of intense, changing emotions.

People react strongly to political or other community events. There is a tendency for emotions to be expressed via practical problems or other events in their lives such as to blame those providing services for things over which they have no control.

People are often overloaded or under constant stress for many months in the recovery period. Health may deteriorate, accidents increase and relationships become tense. Often these problems develop slowly without those concerned noticing because of their preoccupation with other more pressing events.

The inequality of the disaster's effects on people leads to jealousy, rivalry and changes in friendship networks. Misunderstanding and confusion are common together with doubt and scepticism about what can be trusted and accepted.

Long-Term Responses (months to years)

For many people, some effects of the disaster only become obvious after a year or longer. They involve economic hardship, effects of living under stress for a long period, poor health, depression, relationship problems, problems with children's development or behaviour, loss of leisure and recreation, loss of friendship networks, loss of sense of direction in life, continuing disturbing memories of the disaster.

People may feel isolated from friends and family because their continuing concern with it is not understood. The community may have undergone changes and no longer feels the same as the one they once knew, so they feel isolated at home as well.

Many aspects of marital and family life, which may have been postponed because of other demands now come to the fore, often in the form of crises.

Remember: help is available when you are experiencing these responses. Talk to your family and friends and reach out to organisations and specialists in the community for further support if necessary. Know that you are not alone.

This fact sheet has been reproduced from information provided by Dr Rob Gordon, Clinical Psychologist, consultant to the State Emergency Recovery Unit of the Victorian Department of Human Services.

It is intended as a guide to help people deal with traumatic events and is not a substitute for seeking professional help.

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