



Psychological Effects of Disasters

Whether you are responding to a disaster as a first responder or volunteer, or a victim of one, the psychological effects can be intensive. Below, we've highlighted aspects of disasters and how you can help your mind and body recover.

Types of Disasters

Health: Epidemics, environmental pollution...

Technological: Hazardous materials spill, utility failures, power, gas, sewer, nuclear accidents, plane crashes...

Social: Crime, war, acts of terrorism...

Natural: Hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, floods, earthquakes, fires...

Important Aspects of a Disaster

Warning: A disaster that strikes without warning produces the maximum social and psychological disruption.

Contrast of Scene: Without warning, a disaster that occurs suddenly can cause an abrupt change of reality that is difficult to comprehend.

Prior Disaster Experience: Communities that have been through a similar experience often adapt and function quickly.

Amount of Social Disruption Due to a Disaster: The greater the damage to roads, communications, hospitals, and public utilities, the more stress exists for survivors.

Interpersonal Factors: Pre-existing stresses in relationships, marital problems, and family difficulties may place an individual at a higher risk.

Important Variables Related to Disasters

Degree of Uncertainty: Disasters with higher degrees of uncertainty are more traumatic than disasters with fairly predictable outcomes.

Time of Occurrence: Disasters at night are reported to be more psychologically disturbing.

Duration of a Disaster: If the disaster is brief, psychological reactions tend to be less intense than if individuals are subjected to prolonged, intermittent stress.

Scope of a Disaster: There will be greater psychological impact with the increased amount of injuries, deaths, and damages.

More About Psychological Effects of Disasters

Community Variables

Size of Community: In small communities where victims know each other, they may experience higher self-expectations to help one another.

Previous Degree of Social Solidarity: Communities that were cohesive and supportive before a disaster often recover quickly and experience less stress than communities with a low degree of social contact.

Prior Disaster Experience: Cumulative stress from prior disaster responses and rescues may leave you at risk if you have not worked through the feelings and experience, or may desensitize you to disasters. Successful outcomes from previous events may help individuals develop coping and survival skills/strengths.

Coping with Disaster-Related Problems

Psychosomatic: Headaches, back pain, flu, rashes, chest pains, gastrointestinal issues, vomiting...etc.

Behavioral/Social: Withdrawal, isolation, alienation of friends or family, frequent arguments, hyperactivity, domestic violence...etc.

Emotional: Anxiety, hopelessness, depression, despair, short-term memory loss, anger, terror, horror, feelings of vulnerability, irritability, frustration...etc.

Ways of Coping

Pay Attention to Your Health: Get adequate sleep, utilize relaxation techniques, avoid the use of alcohol and other substances...etc.

Rebuild Personal Relationships: Spend time with friends, family, loved ones...etc.

Recovery: Exercise, take vitamins, talk through any issues, read for pleasure, do what you enjoy, eat healthy meals, encourage family discussions...etc.

