



Managing Traumatic Stress After the Tornadoes

The effects of the recent tornadoes can be long-lasting and the resulting trauma can reverberate even with those not directly affected by the disaster.

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.

How should I help myself and my family?

Many people already possess the skills of resilience and will bounce back on their own, given time. There also are a number of steps you can take to help restore emotional well being and a sense of control following a natural disaster, including the following:

- 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. These can be especially helpful for people with limited personal support systems.
- Try to find groups led by appropriately trained and experienced professionals such as psychologists. 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 because they can suppress your feelings rather than help you to manage and lessen your distress. In addition, alcohol and drugs may intensify your emotional or physical pain.
- Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. This can be especially important when the normal routines of daily life are disrupted. Even if you are in a

shelter and unable to return home, establish routines that can bring comfort. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.

-Help those you can. Helping others, even during your own time of distress, can give you a sense of control and can make you feel better about yourself.

- Avoid major life decisions such as switching careers or jobs if possible because these activities tend to be highly stressful.

When should I seek professional help?

Many people are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by a natural disaster by using their own support systems. It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems persist and continue to interfere with daily living. For example, some may feel overwhelming nervousness or lingering sadness that adversely affects job performance and interpersonal relationships.

Individuals with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional. Psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers help educate people about common responses to extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact.

With children, continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the traumatic event, continued and extreme withdrawal, and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents understand and deal with thoughts, feelings and behaviors that result from trauma.

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