

Protecting your Mental Health during Faraway Disasters

Firstly, we acknowledge the huge tragedy of the earthquake in Turkey and our thoughts go to everyone impacted – directly and indirectly – by this tragic event. This article looks at the impact of natural disasters when viewing and reading about them from a distance; and how we can look after ourselves and others impacted by tragedy.

Throughout any lifetime, there will inevitably be world events, such as disasters, that can cause a range of emotions including sadness, anxiety and anger – even when they happen (or are happening) geographically far away or have no direct impact on our lives.

Disasters can be natural, caused by people, or both and can cause devastation not only to physical structures, but to communities as well. While it can be hard to comprehend what the people involved are going through, watching it from afar can also conjure negative feelings.

COMMON REACTIONS

Disasters typically involve two stages:

- 1) **The immediate event itself**
- 2) **The response and rebuilding/recovery stage**

Both present their unique challenges, but typical impacts on our mental and physical health include:



Mental Health:

Shock — Disbelief at what has happened, causing feelings of numbness as if things are not real.

Fear — For the safety of those involved and/or irrational fears of one's own safety.

Anxiety — About whether more people could get hurt and/or whether you could somehow be impacted in some way.

Anger — At who caused it or “allowed it to happen”, or at the injustice and senselessness of it all.

Sadness — About the human and physical losses.

Shame — For not being able to help or feeling guilty for being safe in your own home.

Physical Health:

Sleep — Difficulty getting to sleep because of intrusive thoughts and being frequently woken up by dreams and/or external noises.

Physical problems — Including headaches, palpitations, breathing difficulties and general aches and pains.

These mental and physical issues can begin to affect our everyday lives and how we think and behave.

Our thinking:

- Frequent thoughts or images of the incident.
- Thoughts or images of other frightening events.
- General confusion and disorientation.
- Difficulty concentrating, staying in the moment or solving problems.



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Our behaviour:

- Withdrawal from others and a need to be alone.
- Easily irritated by other people.
- Loss of interest in normal activities and hobbies.
- Not wanting to go to work and poor motivation.
- Increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or drugs.
- Unhealthy dietary choices or a loss of appetite.

It is reassuring to know that, even though these feelings may be very unpleasant, they are normal reactions in a normal person to an abnormal event. You are not losing your mind or going crazy if you have these feelings. In most cases, you need to dial up your self-care and take steps to protect your mental and physical health.

HELPING YOURSELF DURING/AFTER A DISASTER

Looking after your physical and mental health during these moments doesn't mean ignoring your feelings in the hope that they go away. It's okay to feel the way you do, so take time to acknowledge how you're feeling. Recovery is about becoming more resilient to what is happening and building confidence in your ability to cope as time goes on. Whatever your individual feelings are about the disaster, there are numerous things you can do to help to support your reaction and recovery:

1) Control your social media intake

Today, information about traumatic world events is available at our fingertips and, while it's important to be an informed citizen, headlines - meant to grab our attention - can do more to incite fear than offer information. During these times, it's imperative to be honest with yourself about how much news is too much for you and what your limits are for dealing with external stress.



2) Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness activities, including meditation, are powerful tools to combat stress. They can help take the focus from expecting the worst and, instead, redirect your mind to a place of rest.. A mindfulness

practice, such as breathing exercises, can help you feel more rooted in the present moment, acknowledging that while there is no way to control what happens in the future, you are safe right now. If it applies to your belief system, prayer can serve a similar purpose and allow you to feel more grounded.

3) Make a difference where you can

If you feel helpless about a faraway disaster, there are always ways to help and give you a voice. You could get involved in forms of activism, join organisations, talk to others about what you value or make a donation to a charity helping the communities affected.

4) Spend more time outdoors

Try to sign out of your social media, step away from the news and spend more time outside in nature. Being outdoors is proven to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, with a short walk amongst nature having the ability to lower activity in the prefrontal cortex (the region associated with repetitive negative thoughts).



5) Be more active

When you experience stress, your muscles tense. Practicing movement that releases tension can help you process difficult emotions. Upgrade your general movement to exercise to release feel-good hormones in the brain. The exercise doesn't have to be too strenuous, a 30-minute brisk walk or even desk exercises can make you feel physically and mentally better.

6) Understand your limits

It's okay not to be okay. So, recognise that you may find tasks more strenuous than usual. Plan accordingly and don't get too stressed or disappointed if you make a mistake or take longer doing a task. We're all human!

7) Get into a routine and nurture good sleep

Sticking to a routine can make us feel more in control when external forces make us feel the opposite. Structure your days and try to schedule at least one enjoyable activity each day. Avoid late dinners, alcohol or bright phones before bed to give you a better chance of getting a good night's sleep.

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PROTECTING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DURING FARAWAY DISASTERS

If your usual routine is proving too strenuous, that's okay! Take your time and get back into your normal routine bit by bit.

8) Eat a healthy diet

Food plays a bigger role in mental health than we think and, during times of stress, it can be easy to slip into a habit of reaching for comfort food over balanced, nutritional meals. However, a low-nutrition diet can contribute to stress. A regular diet that integrates healthy, nutrient-rich foods boosts mood and lowers stress levels.

9) Stay connected

Humans are social animals and spending time with friends or family can support our need for quality interactions. Your close connections can also provide safe spaces where you can talk through your feelings. Sometimes simply talking about our emotions can put us on the right track.

10) Talk to a mental health professional

Sometimes, our own coping strategies may not be enough to stop the stress, anxiousness or depression from affecting our everyday lives. If that's the case, then talking about these feelings with a mental health professional is beneficial. They can help you implement methods to handle the fear and emotions that come from dealing with a crisis and help you function and cope in a time of uncertainty.



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