



## **“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Coping with Emergencies, Disasters and Violent Events**

Like any life stressor, public health emergencies (e.g., pandemics), disasters (e.g., tsunamis, earthquakes, tornadoes), and violent events (e.g., mass shootings, terrorist acts, wars), challenge the way we cope. Whether we learn about them on television or experience them personally, we can feel upset, fearful, and/or anxious as a result, both for our own personal safety and that of our family, friends, and community. Stressful events can also bring up feelings and memories of previous traumatic events thereby compounding the distress that we feel.

People who may respond more strongly to the stress of a disaster, emergency or violent event include older adults, children and teens; first responders and health care providers who are helping with the disaster/crisis response; people who have mental health conditions including problems with substance use or who worry excessively; people who live alone or have few social supports; and people who are personally impacted or whose friends and family are personally impacted by what is happening.

### **Things to Keep in Mind about Stress**

It is normal to be emotionally affected, to different degrees, by large-scale disasters and events. It is important to remember that.

- People are strong and resilient, and generally have the skills they need to cope with the stressors they will face in a lifetime.
- Not everyone reacts to the same event in the same way and not everyone shows their distress in the same way.
- The ways in which children and communities cope and react to a stressor are influenced by how they see parents, caregivers and community leaders cope and react.

### **Coping with Disasters, Emergencies, and Violent Events**

#### **Taking Care of Yourself:**

- Hearing about the disaster or crisis repeatedly can be upsetting, so take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media.
- Take care of your body. Take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate. Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Connect with others. Talk with friends and family, or a professional, about your concerns and how you are feeling.
- Manage your thoughts and emotions, and remain hopeful
- Maintain as normal a routine as possible, including engaging in activities you enjoy or find relaxing.





- Be part of the healing (e.g., organize or participate in a public memorial to honour the victims of violence, donate your time/money/supplies, volunteer with a local agency)

### **Taking Care of your Family:**

Disasters and crises can be particularly upsetting to children and teens. Children and teens react, in part, to what they see from the adults around them so stay calm to provide the best support. In addition to limiting your family's exposure to news coverage of the event and maintaining regular routines enjoyable activities, you can support your child or teen by:

- Giving them the opportunity to talk about their concerns, telling them the truth, reassuring them, and letting them know they can count on you.
- Letting them know it is ok if they feel upset or scared and talk to them about ways to cope with their feelings.

### **Responding as a Community:**

- Stay informed and take guidance from experts
- Follow the health and safety guidelines of health agencies and public health officers
- Remember that the media reports things that go wrong, or exceptional events, more often than things that go right, or common events.
- Balance gathering information and heeding safety guidelines to reduce risk with not letting the gathering of information or the attention to safety guidelines unduly preoccupy you.

## **When Psychological Distress Becomes Too Much**

Disasters, crises, and violent events will affect people differently. We can be affected psychologically and/or physically; some reactions can be immediate, and others can be delayed. Violent events can be especially painful when the victims are part of a racial, ethnic, or other group with whom you may identify. Stressors that are beyond our personal control are especially difficult to cope with well.

If you notice your child or teen's behaviour has changed significantly, discuss the situation with them. Signs and symptoms that might signal a psychological problem or disorder for which you or a loved one might benefit from professional help include:

- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns (too much or too little)
- Avoiding others (even within the confines of social distancing) or talking less
- Experiencing headaches, stomach problems, neck or back pain or worsening of chronic health problems
- Excessive crying, worry, sadness, fear, or panic attacks
- Feeling angry, guilty, helpless, numb, confused, irritable or impatient
- Thinking about or watching too much television about the disaster or crisis
- Not wanting to get out of bed





- Having difficulties concentrating or with attention
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs
- Feeling overprotective of loved ones
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past
- Amongst children or teens, poor school performance or avoiding school, return to behaviours they have outgrown (e.g., bedwetting), or “acting out” behaviours

It is important to remember that most of us have had some of the signs and symptoms listed above at one time or another. You are well advised to consult a regulated health care professional such as a psychologist, your family physician, a nurse practitioner, psychiatrist, or other mental health provider if you have a number of these signs and symptoms and they

- persist beyond a couple of weeks
- persist to the point where you are not able to carry out the home or work-related activities permitted by social distancing advisories
- are accompanied by intense feelings of despair or helplessness or suicidal thoughts.

## **How Can Psychologists Help?**

### **Victims of Disasters, Emergencies, and Violent Events – Role of Psychologists**

Whenever there is a disaster, emergency or violent event, psychologists can be and often are mobilized to help.<sup>1</sup> Psychologists are trained to help people cope with stress and strong emotions, whether they be a victim, a witness, a loved one, or a first-responder.

Psychologists can help with individuals deal with the psychological and physical symptoms noted above, through the following:

- Diagnosing a mental health issue and developing a treatment plan
- Helping people build upon their own internal resources to begin the recovery process
- Connecting survivors with others as they learn to cope with both the logistical and emotional challenges of the traumatic event
- Educating people about the range of emotions they may experience following the event
- Listening to people’s concerns on a variety of issues (e.g., parents about children)
- Helping people to manage their temporary living conditions such as shelters
- Providing information about and helping facilitate connections to obtain resources for current needs such as clothing, medical care, etc.
- Advocating for the needs of individuals or families as they navigate systems that have been established to provide aid

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the American Red Cross Foundations of Disasters Mental Health Manual





- Helping people to develop their own personal recovery and change-acceptance plans
- Helping problem-solve conflicts
- Helping people manage any other life disasters that may be occurring simultaneously with the traumatic event
- Helping children to use positive coping strategies, connect with others, help others, and re-establish familiar routines and structures

Psychologists with experience in disaster mental health and/or public health can also offer to consult with recognized humanitarian organizations and/or offer to provide training to other colleagues.

Psychologists can also develop collaborative research relationships with psychologists in the affected regions.

The long-term requirements for people skilled in consultation and training in disaster-affected areas are numerous. Psychologists wanting to help in emergency situations are urged to prepare by getting trained in disaster mental health.

## Where can I go for more Information?

**You can consult with a registered psychologist** to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to <https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.

### Additional resources

[http://cpa.ca/docs/File/Publications/FactSheets/PsychologyWorksFactSheet\\_PTSD.pdf](http://cpa.ca/docs/File/Publications/FactSheets/PsychologyWorksFactSheet_PTSD.pdf)

<http://apa.org/topics/index.aspx>

[http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/mh-sm/pubs/mental\\_illness/acknowl-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/mh-sm/pubs/mental_illness/acknowl-eng.php)

<https://www.redcross.ca>

<https://www.un.org/en/>

<https://www.redcross.org/about-us/our-work/disaster-relief/disaster-mental-health.html>

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

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