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Trauma and Your Mental Health

What is a normal response and when to seek help

After disasters, people experience many powerful emotions. For most people, the intense feelings of anxiety, sadness, grief and anger are healthy and appropriate. These feelings usually lessen over time and impact daily life less and less.

But some people may have a more profound and debilitating reaction to disaster. Knowing what is a normal response to an abnormal situation, and what signs might indicate you have a more serious problem, will help you determine if and when to seek help from a mental health professional.

COMMON RESPONSES

It is “normal” to have difficulty managing your feelings after major traumatic events. Many people will experience some common symptoms in the days and weeks following such an event, such as:

- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation; difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Inability to focus
- Apathy and emotional numbing
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness and depression
- Feeling powerless
- Extreme changes in eating patterns; loss of appetite or overeating
- Crying for “no apparent reason”
- Headaches and stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Excessive use of alcohol and drugs

It is important to remember that everyone reacts differently to trauma and each person has his or her own tolerance level for difficult feelings. To cope with these emotions, you can do some things for yourself and others. Experts say that remaining engaged in our world, staying connected with people, and being optimistic about the challenges ahead are key to riding through otherwise traumatic times. In fact, in times of turmoil, people can make changes that improve their lives and life satisfaction.

However, when feelings do not go away or are so intense that they impair your ability to function in daily life, you may have a diagnosable disorder that requires mental healthcare. There are signs that can help you determine whether you are having a normal reaction to trauma or if you're experiencing a mental health problem. These signs include:

- Nightmares and reoccurring thoughts about the event
- Being unable to stop thinking about what happened
- Avoiding thoughts, feelings or conversations that remind you of the event
- Avoiding places or people that remind you of the event
- Having a sense of a foreshortened future
- Continued difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Feeling jumpy or easily startled
- Being overly concerned about safety
- Feeling guilty, worthless or hopeless
- Not taking pleasure in activities once enjoyed
- Having thoughts of death or suicide

If you are experiencing these symptoms, talking with a mental health professional or taking a mental health-screening test can help you understand how well you are coping with the recent events. Take that step and get help.

Mental Health America of Franklin County has several resources available to help you and others cope with disaster, including fact sheets on post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, coping with loss and other topics. We can also provide referrals to mental health care professionals in Franklin County. To obtain this information, visit www.mhafc.org or call 614-221-1441.

Mental Health America of Franklin County is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We help people navigate the mental health system. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; free support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; Pro Bono Counseling Program where underinsured and uninsured individuals can receive free counseling; community and professional mental health education including Get Connected; maternal mental health support and advocacy (POEM); and a quarterly newsletter featuring legislative updates and new happenings at MHAFC. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board, United Way of Central Ohio, individuals, foundations, and corporations. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at www.mhafc.org.