

DISASTER INFORMATION FOR INDIVIDUALS / FAMILIES

Dear friend,

The recent devastating earthquake that rocked the upper Himalayan region especially Kashmir has resulted in a disruption of the normal routine of the people and the entire fabric of the society. The earthquake had an immense effect in terms of loss of lives, livestock, property, and livelihood of people. Individuals and the families undergo painful experiences of loss.

These individual experiences are very personal and different. Your reaction to the event can be varied. Many a time you would find yourself alone, not able to talk about the experience of disaster to others, especially when several of them are not in a position either to help or comfort. The emotional reactions to the disaster and the loss are often not recognized and understood by many as being natural and expected. **Remember no one who experiences the event or witnesses the event is untouched by it.** It is imperative to recognize these feelings and personally make an effort to recover in a healthy and positive manner. It is necessary to be aware of various reactions during and after the disaster. This will help one to understand his/her feelings, behavior and the recovery methods that could be adopted. Let us examine the immediate reactions that are found among the survivors of the disaster.



Immediate (at the time of disaster)

▪ **Shock and disbelief**

Disaster strikes at the most unexpected hour, so people are totally unprepared. People who survive the event are often found to be in a state of *shock* and show decreased activity. Another common emotional reaction is to feel that the whole event was not real but a bad dream i.e. that of total *disbelief*.



▪ **Panic**

Panic at the time of any severe stress is common and normal. Hence for people to *panic* at the time of disaster is normal. Just an example, when a large number of people are entrapped in the rubble with a small space, it would be natural that all of them would panic and try to get out at the same time causing a stampede.

After the disaster

▪ **Vigilance**

One might find him/herself hyper alert – responding to each and every sound and /or light in the surrounding, constantly on vigil for signs of further disasters. Due to this one can find difficulty in sleeping. Sometimes one can become irritable and angry. *This is a very normal phenomenon. It is only a protective behavior, which usually decreases gradually over a period of time.*

▪ **Despair**

One might feel helpless and abandoned and look forward for some form of rescue. Even in a crowd one might feel lonely. *Forty year old S who was trapped alone under the rubble could hear people faintly, but was unable to get through them and despaired of getting rescued.*



▪ **Elation**



One might feel happy that he/she has survived the disaster, while many others have died. This also puzzles and disturbs the individual as he/she might be wondering that *“how is it that I am happy and relieved instead of feeling sad when so many others have died?”*

There is nothing to feel guilty about it. It is a normal feeling among the survivors.

▪ **Guilt**

Feelings of repeated blaming oneself for having survived keeps coming back, especially if the survivor has lost his/her near and dear ones. *P a 35-year-old man used to say repeatedly, “it is because I was not there on time, my wife, and children could not get out in time from the house before it collapsed”.*

▪ **Reliving the experience and flashbacks**

Several times one would remember or re-live the experience of the disaster repeatedly. Small incidents may trigger these experiences. This can happen more during nights. Being involved in relief work can also trigger off “these attacks”. Having to remove dead bodies or identifying dead bodies might put one to a state of panic. *After the earthquake, 30 year old J used to get bad dreams during nights of her dead husband and child screaming out to her for rescue. Due to this she could not sleep properly.*

▪ **Numbness or being empty**

Survivors might be found to be in a state of numbness and being empty. They may fail to feel anything, even the loss of near and dear ones. Some might withdraw themselves totally. They might not eat or sleep for many days.

When seven year old S lost both her parents and a two months old brother in the earthquake, her reactions were numb and she was silent for many days, not talking or interacting with other children of her age. She neither cried nor laughed. She lost her appetite and had to be forced to eat.

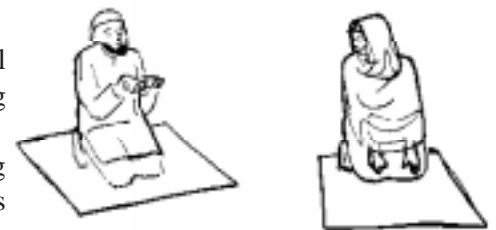
It has to be remembered always that these are normal reactions to n abnormal situation.

Recovery mechanisms

These reactions start decreasing in most people in a few weeks if some activities are initiated to reorganize the life. After a few weeks/ months, even though the memories of the disaster might remain, you should not stop from moving ahead in your life.

At a **personal level**, following activities can be started to recover:

- Listen to authentic information about the disaster.
- Accept the changes that are taking place around
- Be with people from the same village i.e. people one is familiar with, even in temporary dwellings
- Organize women, children, adolescent girls, aged together, if possible with their own families
- Sharing one’s feelings and experiences about the disaster with others, if possible with family members. This helps one to express/release his/her feelings.
- Restart activities and get back to earlier routine as early as possible
- Encourage to practice one’s own religious activities
- Take time for relaxation everyday. Make some time for recreational activities like playing, reading, listening to music, singing, reading scriptures.
- Initiate and participate in rituals like collective grieving, group mourning with others. This would help to come in terms with the loss that has occurred.
- Participate in rescue and relief activities. This would help in healing.
- Acknowledge the fact that one would not be always functioning at one’s usual level of efficiency for a few weeks/ months.



In any disaster situation there are some groups of people who become more vulnerable due to the loss and it is imperative to focus and concentrate on these groups and address their special needs. These groups comprise of:

- Women
- Children
- Aged
- Disabled

WOMEN

Generally women experience greater degree of emotional distress as compared to men. Due to various biological and socio-economic factors women experience more stress and thus feel vulnerable than men in disaster situations. Women respond to stress differently from men, which can be manifested in the following ways:

- .. Crying spells and later on being depressed
- .. Manifestation of reactions like “fainting”
- .. Experiencing multiple body aches and pains
- .. Showing more resilience than other groups to care for the young



They can be helped in the following way:

- .. Women should be kept together with family members or familiar people rather than taking them away to far away places
- .. Disseminate information about the safety of their husbands, children and family members.
- .. Involve them in routine activities like, community kitchen, taking care of other children and the aged, cooking, caring for the sick.
- .. Encourage sharing their feelings about their loss and suffering in groups.

CHILDREN

Children also get affected by the disaster and become aware of the changes that take place around them. Children of different age groups react in different ways to the disaster.



Very young children might manifest the following reactions:

- .. Crying as a sense of insecurity of losing.
- .. Clinging to adults, especially to familiar people to ensure sense of security

Older children (school goers) might manifest:

- .. Nightmares or talk about the disaster repeatedly

When eight year old B lost her father in the earthquake her sleep was badly disturbed. At night she used to have nightmares and used to scream “pappa” “pappa” and wake up from sleep and run away. She also started walking in sleep and had to be brought back by others.

- .. Behave like a much smaller child than his/her age and develop bed wetting, thumb sucking
- .. Refusing to separate from the familiar ones even for a short span of time.
- .. Physical symptoms like abdominal pain, headache, movements of the body, which is one way of communicating distress.
- .. Anger, irritability, picking up fights easily etc., are seen



They can be helped in the following way:

- .. Allow the child to be with known adults like mother, siblings, neighbors
- .. Engage the child in play and recreational activities like drawing, story telling, singing, clay modeling etc.,
- .. Getting the children back to their earlier routine of eating, sleeping, play and going to school
- .. Provide security to the child by touching him/her often, reassuring verbally etc.,
- .. Allow the child to talk about his/her feeling of the disaster either in-group situation or at an individual level.

AGED

When faced with the death of many younger one's, aged people might become very depressed and may take longer time and more effort to recover. They might manifest reactions in the following manner:

- .. Withdraw, cry and groan for many months
- .. Sleeplessness and loss of appetite

They can be helped by the following ways:

- .. Keep them with their family members or known one's
- .. Attend to their immediate medical needs
- .. Convey to them positive news repeatedly
- .. Need to re-establish their earlier routine
- .. Allow them to express their feelings about the disaster and subsequent loss.



DISABLED

Disabled people are also equally affected by any disaster as others. They also manifest many reactions as a response to the disaster and loss that occurs. The disability may often stretch their recovery skills.

They can be helped in the following ways by:

- .. Keeping them updated about the situation as that gives them a sense of being involved and not ignored
- .. Shifting them to a place which is safer for them to recover



INJURED PARAPLEGICS / AMPUTEES

The massive earthquake has left many of our near and dear ones with severe injury which can lead to permanent or partial disability. The amputees and paraplegics are the worse sufferers among them. Due to sudden change in physical condition with many other changes in life it becomes very difficult for them to accept the wide physical limitations. On one hand coping with loss, on the other hand getting adjusted with changed physical condition have become very painful for the injured survivors. The injured, specifically the paraplegics and amputees need to be given special attention.

They can be helped in the following ways:

- .. Provide continuous medical care.
- .. Help the injured to accept the changed physical status.
- .. Mobilise the support for the persons from the family and community.
- .. Allow them to express their worries, concern and experience of earthquake.

YOU COULD ACCESS HELP FROM

- .. Local administrative officers
- .. Local health authorities – District Health Officers, Primary Health Doctors, Nurses, Community health workers.
- .. NGOs, CBOs and Voluntary organizations
- .. Radio / TV for authentic dissemination of information regarding the disaster

For further information:



National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, Bangalore-560029, Ph:0 9845214397

Supported by:



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