

COPING WITH A MAJOR PERSONAL CRISIS

Compiled by

Dr Paul Valent and Dr Ellen Berah, Monash Medical Center, 246 Clayton Road, Clayton,
Melbourne 3168

Dr Julie Jones and Ruth Wraith, Royal Children's Hospital, Flemington Road, Melbourne 3052
Rev John Hill, Uniting Church Center.

Produced by the Australian Red Cross Society, Victorian Division
171 City Road, South Melbourne, Victoria 3205.

What you have experienced is a unique and personal event. This booklet will help you to know how adults and children have reacted in similar situations. It will show how you can help *normal healing to occur* and how to *avoid some pitfalls*.

Normal Feelings and Emotions Experienced

SHOCK AND DISBELIEF

- * The event seems to be unreal, like a film or a dream.

NUMBNESS

- * Your emotions are cut off.

FEAR

- * Of death, of injury or harm to yourself and those you love.
- * Of being left alone, of having to leave loved ones.
- * Of "breaking down", or "losing control".
- * Of a similar event happening again,

HELPLESSNESS

- * Crises may reveal human frailty, as well as strength.

EUPHORIA

- * Joy of survival, feeling high, excited, close to everyone.

SADNESS

- * For deaths, injuries and losses of every kind.

LONGING

- * For all that has gone and will not be.

GUILT

- * For not having helped or saved others.
- * For being alive and uninjured.
- * For being better off than others, having things.
- * Regrets for things not done.

SHAME

- * For not having felt and reacted as you would have wished.
- * For having been helpless, “emotional”, and needing others.

ANGER and FRUSTRATION

- * At what happened, whoever caused it or allowed it to happen.
- * At the injustice and the senselessness of it all.
- * At the shame and indignities.
- * At the lack of proper understanding by others, the red tape and inefficiencies.
- * **Why me ? Why?!**

LET DOWN

- * Disappointments, which alternate with...

HOPE

- * For the future, for better times.

These feelings are common and normal. Nature heals through allowing their expression. Expressing your emotions and feelings does not mean that you are out of control, or having a nervous breakdown. Even intense feelings occur for only limited periods. They can be dealt with, and you can put them on hold when necessary. You, or others, may block your feelings for fear that they are too painful. The most common ways of blocking are cutting off feelings and being overbusy.

Sometimes you may not be able to express or deal with your feelings immediately. Then your reactions may take some time, even months or years to be experienced. The earlier you are able to deal with these feelings, the sooner your healing begins. Prolonged blocking of feelings may lead to difficulties.

**Do remember that *abnormal*
responses
are *normal* to *abnormal* situations.**

Remembering and Memories

The events and feelings may return to you in your thoughts, daydreams, images, flashbacks, night dreams and nightmares. You may remember past crises. These are normal ways to process the event and make meaning of it.

Suppression, pushing things out of your mind, may lead to loss of memory, concentrations and fuzziness of the mind.

Physical Reactions

Your body, as well as your mind may be affected immediately or even many months later.

COMMON REACTIONS INCLUDE

- * Tiredness, shakes, dizziness, palpitations.
- * Difficulty in breathing, choking in the throat and chest pains.
- * Nausea, diarrhoea, vomiting.
- * Muscular tension, or pain, headaches, neck and back pain.
- * Menstrual disorders, dragging in the womb. Miscarriages may occur.
- * Increased or decreased sexual desire and activity. Pregnancies are more common after some crises.

Infections frequently occur when you are run down. Alcohol, coffee and drug intake may increase due to extra tension. Accidents are more frequent after severe stress.

Family and Social Relationships

You may form new friendships and groups. However strains in relationships may also appear. As well as the good feelings of giving and receiving there may be conflict, anger and jealousy. You may feel that too little or the wrong things are offered, or that you cannot give as much as expected. Changes may occur in the way families, friends and the community relate to each other.

Children

Children also experience emotional and physical responses in crises. Their imaginings and nightmares add to the fear of the event. Children express themselves through talking, play and drawing. Their distress may be shown by returning to earlier way of behaving, such as clinging. Sometimes these behaviors may be a burden on already stressed parents and teachers. Yet children need the closeness and comforting of their families. They need to be understood, believed,

and given honest explanations. They need reassurance about their own safety and that of the family and that they did not cause the event.

THE FOLLOWING MAKE THE EVENTS AND THE FEELINGS ABOUT THEM EASIER TO BEAR

DOING THINGS

- *To be active and useful may provide relief and a sense of control.
However, overactivity may be harmful if it stops feelings too much.

REALITY

* Facing reality will help you to come to terms with the event. For example, viewing the body, going to the funeral, returning to the scene, inspecting losses and visiting the ill and injured.

TALKING

* It will help you to talk about your experiences and how you feel about them; often many times. It also helps to listen to others who have been affected.

SUPPORT

- * *Be open to receiving* support and comfort and *give* them when you can.

PRIVACY

* Make time and space for yourself to be alone with your own thoughts and feelings.

EXERCISE REST AND RECREATION

- * Are important to maintain your physical and mental health.

Reactions May Be More Intense or Troubling for the Following People

BEREAVED

- *Especially:
 - * Where deaths were multiple, sudden or violent.
 - * When a child or young person died.
 - * When the body was not found.
 - * When the relationship with the person was difficult.

ELDERLY

* Readjustment may be harder because of reduced energy and time to rebuild.

EVACUATED/ISOLATED

* Those who are hospitalised, evacuated or alone may lose the support of friends and community. Isolation may also occur due to language or cultural differences.

UNWELL AND DISABLED

* Anyone with illness or physical or mental disabilities needs special care and support.

THOSE WITH OTHER CRISES

- * People for whom the crisis is an addition to other painful experiences.
- * People who are thrown back to the pain of a previous trauma or loss.

EMERGENCY WORKERS/VOLUNTEERS/HELPERS

- * Especially people who:
- * Have given deeply of themselves.
- * Came into close contact with the injured, dying or dead.
- * Felt they failed to do their jobs properly.
- * Experienced “burn-out”.

Some Do's and Don'ts

DON'T Bottle up feelings.

DON'T Avoid talking and thinking about what has happened.

DO Allow yourself time to talk, grieve, be angry, cry and laugh according to your needs.

DO Allow your children to share in your grief and encourage them to express their own.

DO Allow yourself to be part of a group of people who care about you and what you went through.

DO Spend time alone when you need it.

DO Recognise that everyone expresses things in their own way. Men generally find it harder to express emotion and weep. Children may need encouragement to express themselves.

DO Take time out to sleep, rest, enjoy and do routine things when possible.

DO allow your children to return to school and keep up with their activities as soon as they are ready.

DO Express your needs clearly and honestly to family, friends and officials.

WARNING
***Accidents and Illnesses are
More Common
After Severe Stresses,
THEREFORE:***

DO Drive more carefully.

DO Keep up usual safety standards.

DO Continue your normal medical treatment.

DO Watch your diet and physical health.

DO Be more careful with coffee, cigarettes, alcohol, and drug intake.

Seek Professional Help If

- * Your *emotions or physical symptoms* are too intense or persistent.
- * You feel too *numb, cut off* or you have to keep *active* in order not to feel.
- * You continue to have *nightmares, poor sleep* or “*flashbacks*”.
- * Your family, social or work *relationships* suffer.
- * *Sexual* problems develop.
- * You experience loss of *memory* and *concentration*.
- * Your *performance* suffers at school, work or at home.
- * You have *accidents* or *illnesses*.
- * You increase *smoking, drinking* or *drug* taking.
- * You have *no one to talk to* about your experiences. You belong to *one of the special groups* mentioned above.
- * You have *lost faith* in yourself or the world.

SEEKING SUPPORT IS A POSITIVE STEP

***Deep reaching experiences
may lead you***

*to have a sense of being
different to before.*

*The inside, as well as the
outside, changes.*

*In time you may develop
deeper understanding
of yourself and what it means
to be a human being.*

For further help please contact:

