

## after a disaster or emergency

In a disaster or emergency situation, most people experience some form of psychological distress. For example strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt or anger. In the days (and perhaps weeks) following the event, these feelings may be intense. However, in most cases, our reactions will lessen over time, and most of us will gradually start to feel better, especially if we are able to use healthy and helpful ways of coping and we receive support from those close to us in our families and communities.



### How might I feel?

- There is no right or wrong way to feel in the face of an emergency or disaster situation and those involved, whether directly or indirectly, may experience a range of emotions.
- You may feel anxious and afraid and these feelings might be triggered when you are reminded of what has happened even if you and your loved ones are now safe from harm.
- You may feel sad and upset or be grieving. Especially if you have experienced loss.
- You may feel cut off and distant from others and the world around you. You may also feel numb. Things may feel unreal and it may be difficult to accept what has happened.
- You may notice that you feel shame or guilt about what you did or did not do, or elated at the fact that you survived.
- You may have feelings of anger or aggression towards other people or may find yourself acting recklessly or in self-destructive ways.
- You may experience vivid memories about what happened during the day, or have distressing and frightening dreams at night.
- You may find that your sleep is disturbed and that you find it difficult to concentrate and/or have become forgetful.
- You may notice that you are trying to avoid people, places or situations that remind you of what happened, and this is interfering with your normal day to day life. Or that you are trying not to think about what happened.
- You may not experience any of these emotions, and whilst you accept you have been through something difficult and distressing, you are doing fine.
- You may experience none, some, or all of the feelings above, and whatever you feel, that's OK.



### How long will I feel this way?

In most cases, these difficult and distressing feelings may last a few days or weeks and will begin to lessen over time.

There is no timescale for getting over a traumatic experience. If you are continuing to feel some of these feelings after a month but they are improving and you are beginning to feel better, then it is likely that natural healing is taking place, and you are on the path to recovery.

However, if things aren't improving, are getting worse, and/or you are continuing to feel significant distress it is worth seeking professional advice and support as you may be developing a post traumatic injury.

### Where to access support

#### Support for people who have experienced a traumatic event

NHS Inform  
[www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing/dealing-with-traumatic-events/support-for-people-who-have-experienced-a-traumatic-event/](http://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing/dealing-with-traumatic-events/support-for-people-who-have-experienced-a-traumatic-event/)



Mind to Mind  
[www.nhsinform.scot/mind-to-mind](http://www.nhsinform.scot/mind-to-mind)



Disaster Action  
[www.disasteraction.org.uk](http://www.disasteraction.org.uk)



iThrive  
[www.ithriveedinburgh.org.uk](http://www.ithriveedinburgh.org.uk)



#### Support for emergency staff

Lifelines Scotland  
[www.lifelines.scot](http://www.lifelines.scot)



It may also be helpful to contact your Occupational Health Department or Employee Assistance Programme

## What can I do to help myself?



Emergencies and disasters can disrupt the things that keep us well. It's important to be patient with yourself and give yourself time to heal. It's also important to recognise that we can take steps to help ourselves to heal by maintaining or reconnecting with helpful resources and supports.

### Seek out social support

Seek out support from friends, family, colleagues or other people in your world with whom you feel safe and you can trust. You may not want to talk, but being amongst others will help you to feel supported and connected, rather than alone and isolated. If you do feel able to talk about what has happened this can help your brain to begin to make sense of what you have been through and should help to reduce distressing thoughts, memories and dreams.

### Try to maintain structure and routine to your day

This includes routines around eating, sleeping, and your everyday activities. It can help to get back into routine around work and leisure activities too when you feel able.

### Take gentle exercise

We know it helps our bodies if we can stay active through regular exercise. This is especially important after we've experienced a trauma, to help our system use up the stress hormone, adrenalin.

### Calming strategies

It can take time to recover from a traumatic event. Help yourself by knowing what it is that helps you feel calm and try to practise this regularly. This may be using breathing or relaxation exercises, or it may be about listening to music, getting out in nature or sitting down with a book or box set. Notice what works for you and aim to practise it regularly.

### Connecting with others who have been through the same or a similar experience

It can be really helpful to connect with others who have experienced the same event, who you can relate to, and with whom you can access mutual support. You may find this support locally or through an agency such as Disaster Action. [www.disasteraction.org.uk](http://www.disasteraction.org.uk)

### Try to avoid too much media

Try to avoid watching too much TV or accessing too much social media around the event. Whilst some information may be helpful, this can also leave us feeling overwhelmed, leading to an increase in distress and making it difficult to soothe ourselves and turn our alarm system down.

## What might be unhelpful?

Because of the strong and painful feelings that may be experienced following trauma, it makes sense that you may try to find ways to lessen the pain and dull or block the feelings. But this can lead to less helpful ways of coping.

### Try to avoid using alcohol or substances.

It can be tempting to use of alcohol or drugs to lessen or block out painful feelings. These may bring relief in the short-term but they tend to create more problems in the long term. Using alcohol or drugs to push down your thoughts and feelings means that once you stop using substances, the thoughts and feelings are likely to bounce back, meaning the pain and distress lasts longer. Be cautious about using substances and consider whether an alternative strategy like seeking out support, or getting out for some exercise and fresh air might be more helpful.

### Notice if you are withdrawing/avoiding

Again, it may feel like it is helpful to withdraw from others or to avoid places or situations that might remind you of what happened. But this can leave you feeling isolated and alone and can make your thoughts and feelings harder to manage in the long term.

## When might I need to reach out for professional support?

### Look out for warning signs:



- If after a month you are continuing to experience distressing memories and nightmares that are not improving, or are getting worse, you may benefit from professional support.
- If you continue to feel anxious, on edge or easily startled and this is interfering with how you function day to day, then this too can be a sign that you may need some extra help.
- If you have started to avoid people, places or situations, for fear that they will trigger painful memories and feelings, then some additional support may be beneficial.

If you notice any of the above "warning signs" reach out for help sooner rather than later. Support is available and there are effective treatments to help you heal and recover.