

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a light-colored patterned sweater and a pleated skirt, is walking away from the camera on a dirt path through a forest. She is holding a hat in her left hand. The word "Relief" is overlaid in large white letters.

Relief

Emotional recovery after a crisis guidebook

Aetna Resources For LivingSM

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A crisis doesn't just impact your health and safety. It can affect your emotional well-being. This guide will help you find the tools to cope with the emotional aftershocks of an upsetting event.

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Emotional recovery

What comes to mind when you think of a crisis? Many people are focused on just meeting their basic health and safety needs. But a crisis can affect your emotional health too. And recovery takes time.

People are often surprised at the feelings that come up after an upsetting event. It's normal to have a lot of feelings all at once or feel nothing at all. You might experience fear, shock, disbelief, depression, anger and guilt.

These emotional reactions are typical. They're a sign of high stress. And you might experience other stress symptoms. These can include:

- Memory problems
- Insomnia
- Difficulty concentrating
- Lack of appetite
- Irritability

Some people may be at a higher risk for stress.

Children, older adults, those with disabilities or those for whom English is not their native language may face even more intense struggles. Children may become afraid and clingy. Some may act younger or lose skills, like toilet training. Older adults may be disoriented at first. Those with disabilities may require extra help and attention for a while.

Early stress symptoms often fade over time after the event. But if they don't, or if they get worse, you may want to seek help.



Coping with acute stress



Everyone who sees or experiences a crisis is affected by it in some way. Even those who only see it through the media can have serious emotional and stress reactions.

When a crisis occurs, natural or otherwise, the emotional stress can be long-lasting. And the emotional impact is often greater than the event.

After a crisis, it can help to remember:

- Worrying about your own safety and that of your family and close friends is a healthy, natural response.
- Feeling profound sadness, grief and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Accepting your feelings helps with recovery.
- Focusing on your strengths and abilities helps you heal.
- Getting help from community programs and resources is healthy.
- Coping looks different for everyone

Easing your stress

- Talk with someone about your feelings. It's normal and okay to feel anger, sorrow and other emotions.

- Don't hold yourself responsible for the disastrous event. And remember, even if you can't help directly with the rescue work, you can still find ways to help.
- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing. Eat healthy food. Rest. Exercise. Relax. Do activities that keep you calm.
- Try to return to some kind of normal routine. This provides a sense of control. It's also helpful for children involved.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Participate in memorials if you feel that's right for you. And give yourself permission NOT to attend or participate if you feel this would be in your best interest.
- Lean on your support groups. For example, you can ask for help from family, friends, community and religious institutions.
- Ensure you're ready for any future emergencies.

Your top concern after a crisis is your family and loved ones. And when you take care of yourself, you'll be a better caregiver. Small, simple steps can help you get through this tough time.



Reactions to stress



A crisis can overwhelm your senses. Once it's over, you might feel like things should return to "normal" right away. But it can take time to process a crisis. By knowing what to expect, you can start to heal.

During a crisis, it's normal to go into survival mode. This is especially true if it involved death, injury or a threat to one's safety. Just as the body may go into shock because of an injury, it's normal for people to feel an emotional shock after a crisis.

Your feelings are your own. You could face:

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Sadness
- Grief
- Guilt
- Memories of past traumas
- Problems with focus and/or memory
- Thinking about the event over and over
- Confused thinking
- Trouble making decisions
- Intense mood swings
- Numb feelings
- Isolation
- Fear of being alone
- Sleep problems

Don't be surprised if your reactions change. You might go from feeling numb to feeling despair. That's normal. Your brain is trying to keep you from having emotional overload.

Also, it's normal to get focused on safety matters. You could find yourself thinking a lot about keeping yourself and others safe. This is a normal response right after a trauma. Many people blame themselves, even if the event was outside of their control. These feelings might make you feel confused or out of control. But know they can be resolved with time and healing.

If you find you're not feeling better after some time, you can call us to seek help 24/7. Sometimes, we can all use some extra support. You don't have to heal on your own.

Most of all, know that going through a crisis can change you. Take the time to find meaning in the crisis and get to know yourself again.



Beliefs turned upside down



A crisis can challenge beliefs we take for granted. Most of us go about our lives feeling as if our world is a safe place. We often feel as if we're in control.

We tend to have the notion that bad things don't happen to good people. After a crisis, you may find yourself questioning everything. You may feel unsafe. This can make you feel like you have to constantly look out for any danger.

Basic beliefs

Before a crisis

- Life is predictable
- My world is safe
- I am in control
- Good things happen to good people

After a crisis

- I don't know what might happen
- I'm scared and feel vulnerable
- I've lost control
- Bad things can happen to good people

Stressful events affect each person differently. When there's a crisis, almost everyone will have some kind of stress symptom. Sometimes reactions appear right after the event. Sometimes they appear a few hours or a few days later. In some cases, weeks or months may pass before they appear. No matter what, know there isn't a "right" way to feel.

Acute stress symptoms can last days, weeks, months or longer. It may depend on the event. With the support of friends and loved ones, stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Sometimes a counselor can help, too. This doesn't imply weakness.

When you're in survival mode, it can be hard to make choices. To help you gain a sense of control, make as many small decisions as possible. But give yourself time to make major ones. Big decisions are best made after you've regained some sense of balance.

People respond to trauma in their own way. Know that there's no "right" way to react.



What can I do after a crisis?

A lot of times, a crisis is out of our control. Our reactions to the crisis, while normal, can be confusing. And this can make us feel even more powerless. The good news is, you have control over how you handle your feelings.

The way you choose to cope can help you heal. It's normal to want to avoid your feelings. But this avoidance can delay your recovery. The only way to get through this time is to go through it. Let yourself experience your feelings so you can work through them.

If you don't know how to manage your reactions, we suggest you try some of these steps:

- **Get your feelings out.** Think of a balloon. It can only hold so much air before it pops. It's important for you to let "air" out of your emotional balloon. Talking, journaling or doing something artistic can help relieve your stress.
- **Talk about what happened and how you feel about it.** Telling your story can help you find meaning in it.
- **Accept the concern and care of others.**
- **Reach out to your family and close friends.** It can be tempting to withdraw from others. Even if you sit in silence, it's important to be with loved ones.
- **Eat well.** More than ever, your body needs nourishment. If you can only pick at your food, a vitamin might be helpful. It may be tempting, but try to avoid emotional eating.

- **Avoid using alcohol or drugs.** People often use substances to run away from their feelings. This can slow your recovery or add to your problems.
- **Acknowledge support from your coworkers.** Talk about how your reactions may affect your work and how you can help one another.
- **Be realistic about events.** There may be funerals, memorial services or other events after the crisis. Attend with a supportive person. But know that it's okay to stay home if you feel it's the best thing for you.
- **Avoid self criticism.** This is a time for healing, not blaming.
- **Take some positive action in your own life.** Identify your goals and do things that make you feel good about yourself.
- **Exercise.** It can help manage stress and clear your mind.
- **Remember, your reactions are likely to be shared by others.** And remember people will heal in their own ways and their own time.



Stages of recovery from trauma



We like to make sense of things. During times of stress, this feels even more important. Understanding the different stages of recovery can help you feel “normal.” It can help to find order in a time of confusion.

Stages of recovery aren't perfect or universal. We don't all go through them in the same order. We may not even go through all the stages. The most important thing is to let yourself cope in your own way.

These stages outline how we often experience a crisis. You may not go through these stages in order and you may find yourself returning to earlier stages.

Stage 1—Shock, denial and disbelief

- The mind argues the crisis isn't real or can be reversed
- Feelings go numb
- Life feels like a dream
- This stage gives you time to take in the situation

What to do:

- Feel the pain (pain is proof you're human and starting to heal)
- Remember the greater the hurt, the more time you may need to heal
- Give yourself extra rest, sleep and relaxation
- Expect the healing process will be hard and will take time
- Keep regular schedules and routines if you can
- Expect ups and downs in the healing process

Stage 2 — Anger and depression

- Feelings of pain start to come out
- Sadness and crying are common
- You may want someone to blame
- Anger may be directed at those who don't hurt as much as you
- Thoughts can become confused and unfocused
- Despair may be felt for a short time

What to do:

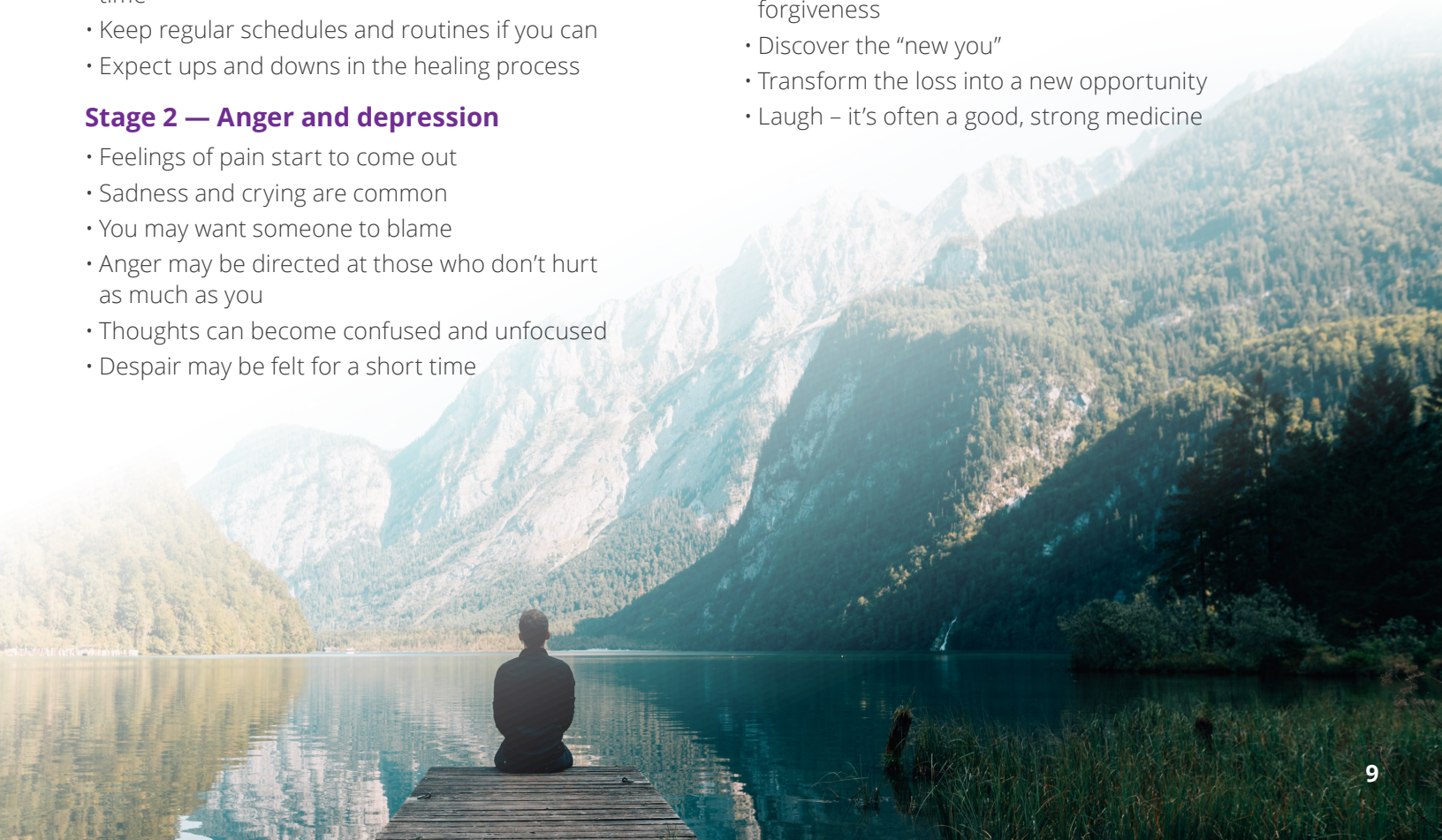
- Beware of the “If onlys...” if they become painful
- Put off major decisions during this time
- Reach out to people you trust. Talk to a counselor if you feel alone
- Realize that anger is okay. It's what you do with it that matters
- Allow yourself time to mourn
- Seek help if you have suicidal thoughts
- Avoid stressful situations
- Do positive activities that make you feel good about yourself

Stage 3 – Understanding and accepting

- Feel peace with the emotional pain you suffered
- Accept what has happened
- Let go of what might have been
- Allow yourself feelings of hope
- Find meaning in the crisis
- Look toward the future

What to do:

- Develop new coping skills and begin to put your life back together
- Let go of the guilt, pain and resentment through forgiveness
- Discover the “new you”
- Transform the loss into a new opportunity
- Laugh – it's often a good, strong medicine





Helping children cope with a crisis

Children often copy their parent's behavior. When parents deal with a situation well, there's a good chance their children will also cope in a healthy way. When problems are kept hidden, children may fear something bad is going on. Often they'll imagine it's even worse than it really is. Be aware that after a crisis, children are most afraid:

- The event will happen again
- Someone will be injured or killed
- They'll be separated from their family
- They'll be left alone

Here are several tips for parents to help children cope:

- Express extra love and affection to your child
- Reassure your child you are safe. Emphasize that you're still together as a family
- Limit TV and other exposure to the crisis. For younger children, keep the TV off during news and crisis coverage
- Encourage children to talk about their feelings. As you listen, be sure not to judge. Help younger children learn to put their feelings into words. But don't make them talk about the situation if they don't want to. Give them time.
- Be willing to share your feelings. Make sure to use terms they can understand.
- Don't ignore the reality of what's happened. Talk about it. This models healthy behavior. It also validates that what they're going through is real and can be hard to deal with.
- Let children and teens know it's normal to feel upset after something bad happens. Tell them these feelings may last a while.
- Let children cry or be sad. Don't expect them to be brave or tough.
- Don't criticize children if they act as they did when they were younger.
- Don't shame your child with words like "babyish."
- Spend extra time with your child at bedtime.
- Let children grieve for what they've lost. Whether those things are small, like a toy or a blanket, or big, like their home.
- Find some extra time to spend together in a family activity. Together you can begin to replace fears with more pleasant memories.
- If your child is having problems at school, talk to the teacher so you can work together to help your child.
- Take care of yourself. This will help you take care of your children.





The importance of daily routines

Daily routines can make children feel safe. They wake up, eat breakfast, go to school and play with friends. When there's a change in their routine, children may become anxious.

In the midst of what may be big changes to your life, try to create some kind of a routine. This helps provide a sense of structure and safety for children. And it can give you a feeling of control.

Parents can provide keys to coping

In a crisis, children will look to you and other adults for help. How you react to an emergency gives them clues for how to act. You want to role model healthy ways of coping. If you focus on the fear and pain, children may become even more scared and anxious. If you focus on loss, they might feel their losses even more acutely.

You don't want to deny the reality and the difficulty of what's occurred. But you can still help your children see you're taking care of them and moving forward. The key is being able to strike a balance and role model how to cope.

Children's fears may also stem from their imagination. You should take these feelings seriously. A child who feels fear is afraid. Your words and actions can provide comfort. Be sure to answer questions honestly. But focus more on solutions than on problems.

Feelings of fear are healthy and natural. But as an adult, you need to stay calm. When you're sure the danger has passed, focus on your child's emotional needs.

- Try asking your child what's on his or her mind. This lets your child give voice to feelings and experiences.
- Correct any mistaken perceptions. This can help put your child's mind at ease.
- Have children participate in the family's recovery activities. Doing so can help them feel their lives will return to "normal." And it can help give a sense of control and hope.

Sometimes these situations can be traumatic. This is especially true for those who see people getting hurt. Talking to a professional can help children cope with that trauma. Take steps to ensure your child copes in the healthiest manner possible. And be sure you're coping in a healthy way, too.

In a crisis, children will look to you and other adults for help. Be sure to role model healthy coping skills.



Helping children grieve



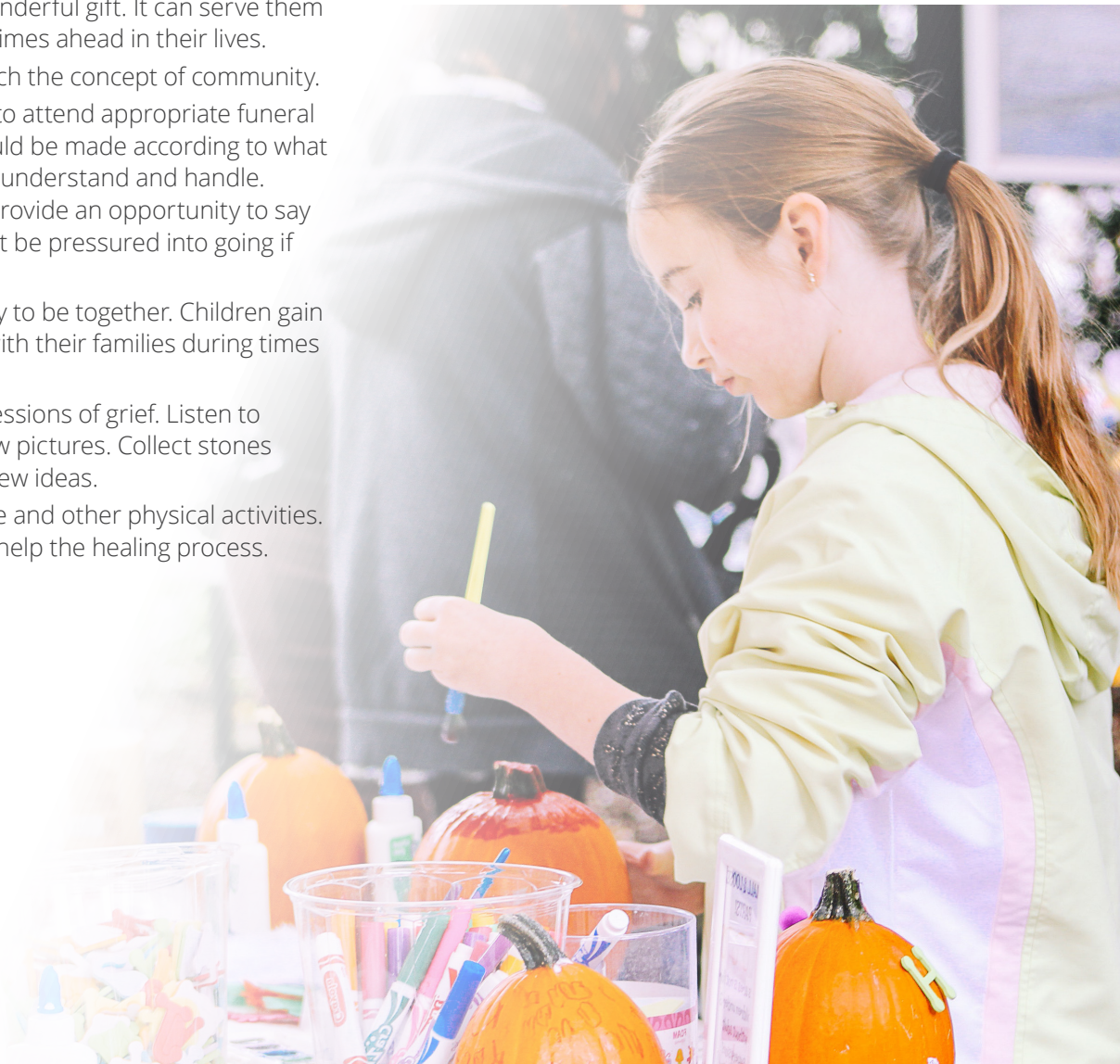
Depending on their age, children don't always express grief in the same ways as grown-ups. Younger children might not fully understand. Teens might feel loss even more intensely than adults in the family. Here are some ways you can help your children during times of loss:

- Set aside time each day to spend one-on-one time with your children. Give them your full attention. Listen to what they have to say.
- Acknowledge and deal with your feelings about the loss so you can be emotionally available to your children.
- Be willing to talk about the feelings you're going through. Just be careful not to dwell on them. This models healthy coping skills. Reassure your children that they're not at fault for the feelings you have. And let them know they're not responsible for helping you change them.
- Know that the words you use and the feelings you express can shape your child's concept of loss and recovery for many years to come. Allowing them to grieve in a healthy manner is a wonderful gift. It can serve them well through the toughest times ahead in their lives.
- Use this opportunity to teach the concept of community.
- Consider allowing children to attend appropriate funeral services. This decision should be made according to what you feel your child(ren) can understand and handle. Attending the funeral can provide an opportunity to say goodbye. But they shouldn't be pressured into going if they don't want to.
- Schedule time for the family to be together. Children gain comfort from being close with their families during times of loss.
- Encourage nonverbal expressions of grief. Listen to music. Create a dance. Draw pictures. Collect stones or leaves. These are just a few ideas.
- Encourage physical exercise and other physical activities. Being physically active can help the healing process.

- Encourage your children to use all their support systems. That includes talking to their friends about what's happened.
- Know that various anniversaries can be especially tough. Look for extra ways to validate and express grief during these times.
- Seek professional help for your child to help them through this, if needed. There are several types of therapy for children that can be very helpful.

Pay special attention to:

- Apathy and withdrawal from family and friends
- Signs of alcohol or drug use
- A drop in school performance
- Obsession with violence or death
- A relentless need to please or be perfect
- Any mention of suicidal thoughts



What can be expected from various age groups

Pre-school and early primary students (3-6 years old)

Children this age tend to be “me” centered

- This age group also uses “magical thinking.” They may think something they thought or did caused the event
- Death is seen as reversible. A child this age may think there is something he or she can do to bring the person back
- Children may complain of physical symptoms like tummy aches. But be sure not to dismiss them without checking with a doctor, too

Mid-primary years to pre-teen (6-12 years old)

- A child in this age group has some understanding of the concept of death
- Children in this age bracket may regress to earlier behavior or misbehave
- Hyperactivity may signal a wish to escape feelings they don't know how to deal with.

- They may exhibit physical symptoms, reflecting a need for nurturing. But be sure not to dismiss them without checking with a doctor, too

Teen years (13-19 years old)

- In the teens, abstract concepts and feelings about death and an afterlife are developing
- There may also be tendencies to idealize or romanticize things, making grief more intense
- Teens may also exhibit physical symptoms, reflecting a need for additional attention. But be sure not to dismiss them without checking with a doctor, too
- Teens tend to be particularly vulnerable to peer reactions to a situation or an event
- Feelings of anger, guilt and depression can be magnified for teenagers

Children express grief in their own way. This can look different based on their age and maturity.



Supporting others after a crisis



It can be hard to know what to do or say to help someone who's gone through a crisis.

Whether the person is a close friend, coworker or acquaintance, you want to be supportive. But it's normal to feel uncertain when you know the person is going through a hard time. Here are some thoughts and suggestions that may help you find comfortable ways to be supportive.

It's a big help to just "be there"

People who've experienced a crisis are in a state of acute stress. They may act angry, sad, shocked, ashamed or break down and cry. Acute stress includes all of these emotions and more. Be present and listen. It's one of the most important things you can do for someone who is struggling.

True listening allows the other person to talk without the listener:

- Making judgments, such as: "You shouldn't feel that way."
- Minimizing feelings, such as: "You're getting too upset over this."
- Making predictions that have no real basis, such as: "You'll feel better in no time."

Most people truly want to help but often don't know what to say. They may also be uncomfortable with expressions of pain, sadness or anger. So while these types of responses may be well-meaning, they may actually block communication with the person trying to express painful feelings. They're not part of effective listening.





How can you listen effectively?

Effective listening lets people know they are heard and understood. Here are several strategies to help you do just that.

- **Let the other person vent.** You don't need to say much at all. But if there's a pause, you can say something like, "I'm so sorry you're hurting" or "I'm here for you." You may want to assure privacy as in, "You can talk to me and it won't go any further." If you make this important promise, be sure to keep it! Gossip runs rampant during stressful times, and it will help others to know that you won't make their personal business part of a rumor mill. Remember, as a listener you don't have to provide answers — just a caring presence.
- **Accept the person's feelings.** Try to avoid saying, "I know just how you feel," because no one truly knows how another person feels. It's more helpful to say or do

things that convey your understanding of the feelings expressed. When friends are upset, you can nod your head, pat them on the back or literally allow them to cry on your shoulder. Again, you don't need to say much.

- **Offer help.** Sometimes people in crisis push others away and decline any type of help. If that's the case, you can try — gently — to offer help. But you must also respect the other person's space. At some point, he or she may come to feel more open to assistance. Then, if the person needs help that you can and want to provide, go ahead and offer it. Support might be a simple gesture such as meeting for coffee to provide some company. Take your lead from the person's wishes.



And what about your own feelings?

A crisis can affect more than one person. Just hearing about a situation can be upsetting. It's natural to feel shaken — even if you're not directly impacted. Some common reactions include:

- **Survivor guilt.** You may feel very upset for people who went through the crisis. And you may even feel “survivor guilt” because you weren't affected. Survivor guilt — as with other forms of guilt — is typically not constructive. Try to remember it's not your fault. If others are resentful, try to let it go. Their feelings may change with time and you may be able to help in the future.

- **Fear.** You may be scared. And that's completely understandable. If that's the case, take care of yourself in the way that is best for you. You must feel emotionally safe yourself before you can be supportive of another's pain.
- **Sense of loss.** You're likely to feel grief too. It's hard to witness others' hardships. Don't be surprised if you experience your own anger, sadness, shock and other grief reactions.

Overall, remember that crises are tough on everyone. Try to be patient and considerate not only to others, but to yourself as well.

Take time to care for yourself. It will help you support others.



Resources



If you want to learn more about the emotional side of crisis recovery, consider these resources:

- **Mental health resources following a trauma**
- **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network**

Mental Health First Aid

Do you want to learn more about mental health problems and how to respond? Similar to CPR and First Aid training, Mental Health First Aid helps people identify, understand and respond to mental health issues. You can find a local training at [mentalhealthfirstaid.org](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org).



**You don't have to cope with a crisis alone.
We're here for you**

When challenges arise, we provide support, guidance, information and resource referrals to you and your eligible household members.

We can help with many issues, including:

- Managing stress and anxiety
- Parenting skills
- Handling conflict
- Balancing work and family... and much more.

When you call

We'll partner with you to assess your needs. If you and/or others in your family need counseling, you will be referred to a provider. If you need help finding community or government resources, we can provide you with resource options that fit your situation.

We can't promise you a stress-free life. But we can provide you with tools and support to awaken your own resiliency. Start now. Help is just a call or a click away.

**We're here for you. Services
are confidential and free —
24/7, 365 days a year.**



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