



Emotional recovery after a crisis guidebook

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



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Emotional recovery



Many people focus on meeting their basic health and safety needs after a crisis. 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 for some to have a lot of feelings all at once, while others may feel nothing at all. You might feel fear, shock, disbelief, anger and/or guilt. These emotional reactions are typical. You might experience other symptoms of stress too. These can include:

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

Early stress symptoms often fade over time. But if they don't, or they get worse, seek help.



Reactions to stress



A crisis can overwhelm your senses. Once it's over, you might feel as if things should return to "normal" right away. You might feel you should be ready to deal with the next crisis. 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 your safety. Just as the body may go into shock because of a physical injury, it's normal for people to feel an emotional shock after a crisis. People respond to trauma in their own way. There's no "right" way to react. Your feelings are your own.

You may experience:

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Restlessness
- Sadness
- Grief
- Intense mood swings
- Numbness
- Fear of being alone or with people
- Guilt
- Confusion
- Lack of focus
- Trouble making decisions
- Memories of the crisis or past trauma

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

If you find you're not feeling better, you can call us to seek help 24/7.



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 experience stress or have serious emotional reactions. When a crisis occurs, natural or otherwise, it can help to remember:

- Worrying about your own safety and that of your loved ones 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



Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing. When you take care of yourself, you'll be healthier. Try to:

- Eat healthy food.
- Get enough rest.
- Exercise.
- Relax.
- Engage in activities that keep you calm.
- Talk to someone about your feelings.
- Don't hold yourself responsible for the event or crisis.
- After a crisis, aim to return to a normal routine as soon as possible. This can help provide a sense of control.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Lean on supportive people and groups including family, friends and community or religious institutions.
- Participate in memorials if that feels right to you. Give yourself permission not to attend or participate if that's what's best for you.
- Get extra support. You don't have to heal on your own.

Most of all, know that going through a crisis can change you. Your top concern is your family and loved ones. And when you take care of yourself, you'll be a better caregiver. Take the time to find meaning in the event and process how you've been affected.

Small, simple steps can help you build resilience and keep stress from taking over.



Beliefs turned upside down



The nature of your work might challenge how you think about yourself, others and the world. Most of us go about our lives feeling as if the world is a safe place. We often feel as if we're in control. But the crisis and stress might leave you questioning your basic beliefs. You may feel unsafe, nervous and out of control.

Basic beliefs

Before the event

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

After the event

- 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. 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.

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?

Most often a crisis is out of our control. Our reactions to the crisis, while normal, can leave us feeling even more powerless. But you do have control over your feelings and how you handle them.

The way you choose to cope can help you heal. Sometimes it seems easier to avoid your feelings. But this avoidance can delay your recovery. Let yourself experience your feelings so you can move forward.

Here are some ways to help you manage your emotions:

- **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 or journaling about your stress can provide some relief. Telling your story can help you find meaning in it.
- **Eat well.** More than ever, your body needs nourishment.
- **Avoid using alcohol or drugs.** People often use substances to numb their feelings. This can slow your recovery or add other issues to your life.
- **Be realistic about events.** There may be funerals, memorial services or other events after the crisis. Attend with a supportive person. But know it's okay to stay home if you feel it's the best thing for you.
- **Take some positive action in your own life.** Identify your goals and do things that help you feel good about yourself.
- **Exercise.** It can help manage stress and clear your mind.
- **Reach out and accept help.** It can be tempting to withdraw from others. But it's important to spend time with supportive friends, family and coworkers.
- **Remember:** People heal in their own ways and their own time.



Helping children cope with a crisis



Children often mirror the behavior of the adults around them. When parents, guardians, teachers and others deal with a situation well, there's a better chance that children will also cope in a healthier way. When problems are kept hidden, children may fear something bad is going on. They may imagine things are worse than they really are. Be aware that after a crisis, children are most afraid:

- The event will happen again
- Someone will get hurt or killed
- They'll be separated from the people they love
- They'll be left alone

Here are some tips to help children cope:

- Express extra love and affection to your child
- Reassure the child you are safe and you're not going to leave them
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings. Help younger children learn how to put their feelings into words. Don't force them to talk about the crisis if they don't want to.
- Listen without judgement.
- Share your feelings in terms they understand.
- Don't ignore what happened. Talk about it when they're ready.
- Let them know it's normal to feel upset after something bad happens.
- Let children cry, be sad or afraid. Don't expect them to be brave or tough.
- Don't get upset if they begin acting younger than their age. Children may regress when feeling stressed or worried.
- Spend extra time with them. Begin to make more pleasant memories.
- Let them grieve what they've lost. Whether those things are small, like a toy or blanket, or big, like their home or sense of security.
- If the child is having problems at school, talk with the staff at the school and work together to provide extra support.
- Limit screen time and other possible ways children might be exposed to the crisis.
- Take care of yourself. This will help you be better able to take care of the child.

The importance of daily routines

Children can feel safer when their daily routines remain in place. They wake up, eat breakfast, go to school and play with friends. When there's a change in their routine, it may cause worry or stress. During a time of major change in your family's life together, try to create some kind of 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. If you focus on fear and pain, children may become even more scared or anxious. If you focus on loss, they might feel their losses even more intensely.

You don't want to ignore the reality or 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 to strike a balance and model healthy ways to cope.

Children's fears may also stem from their imagination. Be sure to take these feelings seriously. Your words and actions can provide comfort. Answer questions honestly, but also in line with their age and level of understanding. Focus more on solutions than on problems. Here are some ways to help your child:

- Ask the child what's on their mind. This lets them know they can share their thoughts, perceptions and experiences.
- Correct any mistaken perceptions. This can help put their mind at ease.
- Include children in recovery activities. This may help them feel things are returning to normal. And it can give a sense of control and hope.
- Get help from a mental health provider. Talking to a counselor may help you and your child cope with trauma and stress in a healthier way.

Helping children grieve

Children don't always express grief in the same way adults do. Younger children may not fully understand the loss. Teens might feel the loss even more intensely. No two people, at any age, grieve the same. Grief is individual.

Here are some ways you can help your children during times of loss:

- Work on your own feelings about the loss so you're able to be present with your children.
- Set aside time each day to spend one-on-one with your child. Give them your full attention. Listen with curiosity. Listen to understand.
- Let them know all feelings are okay.
- Encourage nonverbal expressions of grief such as listening to music, drawing or writing.
- Remember the importance of eating a healthy diet, exercise and getting enough sleep.
- Be willing to talk about feelings you're going through. Model healthy coping skills.
- Allow children to attend appropriate funeral services if they wish. Don't pressure them to attend or participate if they aren't ready.
- Schedule time with close friends and family. Relying on your support system can show your child they aren't alone.
- Seek professional help for your child if needed.

In a crisis, children will look to you and other adults for help. Be sure to model healthy ways to cope.





Typical grief reactions by age

Pre-school and early primary students (3-5 years old)

Children in this age group may:

- Have “magical thinking” and believe they did something to cause the event.
- Believe death is reversible and they can do something to bring the person back.
- Complain of physical symptoms like stomachaches, cry more or act clingy.
- Regress to younger behaviors such as thumb-sucking or wetting the bed.

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

Children in this age group may:

- Have a clear understanding of the concept of death.
- Worry about their own health or dying.
- Act out, misbehave or have trouble paying attention.

Teen years (13-19 years old)

Children in this age group may:

- Have complex feelings about death and dying.
- Feel the loss more intensely and have difficulty managing their emotions.
- Show physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach issues or trouble sleeping

When to seek help:

These are some signs your grieving child may need additional support:

- Apathy or withdrawal from activities, family and/or friends
- Signs of alcohol or drug misuse
- Decline in school performance
- Low self-esteem
- Poor sleep
- Overwhelming sadness or worry
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Thoughts or talking about death or suicide

If you think your child is having trouble managing their grief or is showing signs of physical or emotional distress, seek additional support and resources from:

- Your child’s doctor
- School administration/school counselor
- Employee assistance program
- Mental health providers



Supporting others after a crisis



It can be hard to know what to say or do after someone has gone through a crisis. Whether the person is a close friend, coworker or acquaintance, you want to be supportive. Here are ideas that can help:

- **Be present.** Let the person know you're there for them and want to help.
- **Listen.** It's one of the most important things you can do for someone who's struggling.

When the person is sharing their story and feelings, it's important that you don't:

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

These types of responses may be well-meaning but 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 them talk openly.** You don't need to say much at all. Focus on their story and avoid distractions. Listen with the intent to understand. Be empathetic. Avoid giving advice. You can say, "I'm sorry you're hurting" or "I'm here for you." As a listener you don't have to provide answers — just a caring presence.
- **Accept the person's feelings.** Avoid sharing personal experiences or saying, "I know just how you feel." No one truly knows how another person feels. It's more helpful to say or do things that convey your understanding. You can nod, reflect on what they've told you or allow them to cry on your shoulder if they want to.
- **Offer help.** There's no script or guarantee for helping people who are experiencing emotional distress. After letting them talk and showing you care, offer support. Give specific ways you can help. That may be meeting for coffee or going for a walk together. If you're concerned they may need professional care, encourage them to see their doctor or talk with a mental health professional. You can offer to make the appointment, drive them there or stay with them. You can also talk to them about the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. When they call **988**, they'll connect with a licensed counselor who will listen and provide support and resources. Your support may make it more likely for them to get the care they need.

You don't have to have all the answers. Being present and showing you care is a powerful way to make a difference.

What about your own feelings?

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 upset for people who went through the crisis. You may feel "survivor guilt" because you weren't affected. Try to remember it's not your fault.
- **Fear.** You may be scared. That's completely understandable. If that's the case, take care of yourself in the way that's best for you. Feeling safe helps you to be able to support those around you.
- **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 can help you support others.



Mental health and well-being resources

Resources

- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** provides information and services to promote mental health and prevent substance misuse.
- **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network** works to increase access and services to children and families who experience traumatic events.
- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** is a confidential and free support for people in distress. Call or text **988** to connect with a licensed counselor who will provide support and resources.

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).

Resources for Living

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
- Balancing work and family
- Handling conflict and more

When you call

We'll partner with you to assess your needs. If you and/or others in your family can benefit from counseling, you'll 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. 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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