



Guidebook for

WELL-BEING IN RECOVERY



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	2
EXPECTED REACTIONS TO AN EXTRAORDINARY EVENT	3
DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF DISASTER	4
WHEN THE REACTION OR DISTRESS DOESN'T SETTLE	7
HOW FAMILY AND FRIENDS CAN HELP	9
THE SILVER LINING	10
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES	10
WORKSHEET 1: CHOOSING ENJOYABLE ACTIVITIES	11
SOME ACTIVITIES TO CONSIDER	11
STEP 1: REVIEW THE ACTIVITY LIST	12
STEP 2: PICK AN ACTIVITY TO DO	12
STEP 3: MAKE A PLAN	12
WORKSHEET 2: PROBLEM SOLVING	13
STEP 1: DEFINE THE PROBLEM	13
STEP 2: SET THE GOAL.....	13
STEP 3: BRAINSTORMING	14
STEP 4: EVALUATE AND CHOOSE THE BEST SOLUTIONS	14
STEP 5: MAKE IT HAPPEN	14

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INTRODUCTION

In Canada, emergencies and disasters ranging from individual house fires, power outages and floods to wildfires and hurricanes occur often, and in the most extreme cases, disrupt entire regions. Individuals, families, and communities can be impacted with little warning, causing a great deal of heartache and suffering.

Immediately after an emergency or disaster, a person may experience a range of thoughts, feelings and behaviour that can be intense, confusing and frightening. These are expected reactions to an extraordinary situation.

Most people recover after disasters by drawing on their own resources, capacities, strengths and the support of others; most will gradually rebuild their lives and achieve a sense of well-being again. Some people will continue to feel overwhelmed, be unable to shake the feelings of despair or have signs of more serious psychological problems. It's important to know the difference between an expected reaction to a stressful or potentially traumatic event and the signs that indicate you should seek additional assistance.

This booklet is for adults and is designed to help you understand the reactions you – or someone you know – may be experiencing.

It contains practical advice, numbers to call and websites to visit if you need extra information or support.

Following a disaster, it's important to remember that you are not alone and that help is available.



EXPECTED REACTIONS TO AN EXTRAORDINARY EVENT

When a person experiences a stressful or traumatic event such as a disaster, it can have a profound impact on the person's psychological well-being. People may experience many different emotional and physical reactions which vary in severity depending on how close that person was to the event and the degree of loss the person may have experienced.

Common reactions experienced following a major traumatic event can include:

- feelings of fear, sadness or anger;
- feeling overwhelmed;
- feeling numb, detached or withdrawn;
- difficulty with focusing attention and concentration;
- difficulty planning ahead;
- tearfulness;
- unwanted and recurring memories or bad dreams related to the event;
- sleep problems
- constant questioning – “What if I had done x, y or z, instead?” and “What will happen now?”
- ‘replaying’ the event and inventing different outcomes in order to be prepared should it happen again.

Some people also react by not feeling anything at all, by having difficulties in making decisions or by isolating themselves from others. Some people increase their intake of alcohol, medicine or drugs to escape the pain they are feeling.

These reactions can be quite strong and are often at their worst in the first week. In most cases, they fade over the following weeks, although the person may experience them from time to time for a much longer period. However, if at any time these reactions seriously affect a person's ability to participate in day-to-day activities at home or once back at work, it's important to discuss it straight away with a General Practitioner or mental health professional.

Survivor guilt

Some people connected to the disaster may also be feeling guilty because they survived, but family members, friends, neighbours and people in their community did not. Survivor guilt is common after a disaster and can become a problem for some people if those feelings of guilt are particularly extreme or prolonged. Guilt can also get in the way of asking for help (e.g. “I don't deserve help.” or “Others need it much more than I do.”).

DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF DISASTER

Following a disaster, it's important to find ways to regain a sense of safety and control. People often need to have access to a safe and secure environment, to find out what happened to family members and friends and to have access to relevant services. There are steps you can take to make the situation more manageable for you and your loved ones.

Helping yourself

→ **Spend time with family and friends.**

Spending time with close friends and loved ones is critical following a disaster. Ensure that you have regular contact with people whom you trust and who support you. Ask for practical help and support when you need it – people often want to help and appreciate knowing what you need.

→ **Try to get back to a routine.**

This is very important, particularly if you have children. It can be hard at first because life may be chaotic, but try to think of ways you can return to the pre-disaster routine as soon as possible – for example, eat at the same time you would normally eat each day.

→ **Try to be healthy.**

Although your life might be disrupted right now, do what you can to eat a balanced diet and get some regular exercise – even if it's just going for a walk. Evidence shows regular exercise can improve mood. Looking after your body will help you gain the strength you will need to get through this time. Also, balance exercise with regular rest, relaxation and adequate sleep.

→ **Take time out.**

Do things that you enjoy. This sounds simple, but often after a disaster enjoyable activities become low priority as the task of reconstruction is viewed as more important. It's important, despite it all, to take part in enjoyable activities. You may find it useful to use the worksheet at the back of this booklet to help plan some enjoyable activities.

→ **Limit the amount of media coverage you watch, listen to, or read.**

While getting information is important, watching or listening to news bulletins too frequently can cause distress.

→ **Write down your worries.**

You may find it helpful to write down your worries and concerns and use the problem-solving worksheet at the back of this booklet to identify some practical steps you can take to address those issues. Identify the specific feelings you are experiencing and the concern/worry that may be underlying each of these feelings.

→ **Express your feelings.**

For some people, writing about their experience can be helpful, particularly if they find it difficult to talk about it. Although some distress is normal during this process, if you find writing down your experience too distressing or overwhelming, don't continue. There are many other ways to express your feelings that you may find helpful, such as drawing, painting, playing music, making collages etc.

→ **Accept help when it's offered.**

When disasters occur, they often affect people who have never before had a reason to access government or crisis support services. Getting help can be uncomfortable for some people who are not used to accepting assistance. However, there is no reason not to accept the kindness of others now – you would help them if the situation was reversed.

→ **Don't expect to have the answers.**

When something unexpected happens, there are no guarantees about how the future will turn out. It is normal to feel unsure and confused.

→ **Realise you are not alone.**

Grief, loss and shock, sadness and stress, can make you feel like isolating yourself from others. It may be helpful to remember that many people are feeling the same as you and will share your journey of recovery. Shutting yourself off from others is unlikely to make the situation any better.

→ **Have a plan for anniversaries.**

Anniversaries of the event can be upsetting, particularly if the media coverage is intense. There may be formal events to mark the anniversary which you are invited to attend. There may also be informal events arranged by those affected. You may find these times difficult, so it is helpful to have a plan to reduce the impact. Limit your exposure to media coverage, plan your day with relaxing and enjoyable activities and make sure you have people available to support you.

→ **Plan for the future.**

Disasters will happen. When you are ready, you can use your experience to be more prepared should you ever be involved in a disaster again. The Red Cross has useful information available at www.redcross.ca to help you prepare. You can also make a plan with Public Safety Canada's *Get Prepared step-by-step online guide*. Available online www.getprepared.gc.ca/

There may be a temptation to cope with trauma after a disaster by engaging in unhelpful activities that are likely to get in the way of your recovery from the disaster.

→ **Using alcohol or drugs to cope**

Although these may make you feel better in the short term, overuse or prolonged use of alcohol or drugs can cause serious problems for you and your loved ones.

→ **Keeping yourself busy and working too much**

Keeping busy is good up to a point, but throwing yourself into work or other activities as a way of avoiding painful feelings can be unhelpful in the long term.

→ **Engaging in stressful family or work situations**

Sometimes these are hard to avoid, but, whenever possible, try to reduce stressful interactions between you, your loved ones and friends.

→ **Withdrawing from family and friends**

It's OK to allow yourself some time on your own if you need it, but try not to spend too much time alone.

→ **Stopping yourself from doing things that you enjoy**

Sometimes, after disasters, people feel they should not enjoy themselves in the midst of so much suffering. That doesn't help anyone – it's good for you and others to try to participate regularly in enjoyable activities.

→ **Avoid talking about what happened**

Not everyone is ready to talk at the same time, but most people find that it's very helpful to talk to someone they can trust about what happened and how they are coping.

→ **Taking risks or making major life decisions**

Often, after experiencing a disaster or trauma, people take unnecessary risks or make significant decisions about relationships, accommodation or work. This is not a good time to be making those decisions – take your time.

WHEN THE REACTION OR DISTRESS DOESN'T SETTLE

While it is normal for people who have experienced a traumatic event to go through a range of emotional reactions, for some people the distress persists and they may be at risk of developing a mental health problem, such as:

- depression
- prolonged or complicated grief
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- other anxiety disorders
- problems with alcohol and/or drugs.

People who have experienced deeply upsetting things, may take a long time to adjust to these changes and regain a sense of normality.

There are signs to look for in yourself and in others to indicate that what you are experiencing may be beyond a normal reaction.

Warning signs

If you or someone you know experiences any of the following symptoms at any time, seek professional help:

- If the distress feels extreme or interferes with the person's ability to participate in day-to-day activities
- Feeling overwhelming fear for no obvious reason
- Panic symptoms: increased heart rate, breathlessness, shakiness, dizziness and a sudden urge to go to the toilet
- Avoiding things that bring back memories of what happened to the point where day-to-day tasks cannot be carried out
- Excessive guilt about things that were or weren't said or done
- Loss of hope or interest in the future
- Thoughts of ending one's life or self-harming.

As a general rule, it's a good idea to seek help if you think that you are not coping. You should speak to a health professional if:

- your problems seem too severe
- the emotional reactions are lasting too long
- you're finding it difficult to engage in day-to-day activities or get along with family and friends.

Many people find that one or more visits to a counsellor, spiritual leader, GP or psychologist greatly assists their recovery. Making the decision to access professional assistance if you need it is a wise choice that can often help you to regain emotional strength and resilience.



HOW FAMILY AND FRIENDS CAN HELP

→ **Give them a break.**

Recognise that the person has just been through an extremely stressful event. He/she will need time and space to acknowledge the extent of the losses. You can help by doing practical things, such as offering to mind the children, assisting the person with insurance claims, etc. It's important to remember that people may need support from friends and family members for a considerable amount of time.

→ **Be sensitive.**

If people have escaped with minimal damage to their property and without injury, it's not helpful to say: "Well, at least you still have your house/life/ health." He/she has been through a distressing event and it may make the person feel worse to be singled out as "the lucky one" when friends and neighbours have suffered greater losses.

→ **Choose your news.**

It can be tempting to obsess over news coverage, but too much exposure can be upsetting – particularly for teenagers and children. If the images are distressing the person, turn the TV off and do something else.

→ **Talk it through.**

Try not to gloss over or downplay what happened and do not discourage the person from talking about what they have been through. Offer the person a shoulder to cry on and a sympathetic ear. On the flip-side, it's also important not to press the person to remember or describe the event, or talk about feelings if he/she isn't ready. Sometimes, people say things that are meant to be helpful, but instead the comments just leave the person feeling more isolated and misunderstood. For example, it's not helpful to say: "You just need to get on with your life" or "I know how you feel."

→ **Get help.**

If the symptoms are persisting or causing significant distress, encourage the person to seek extra support from others, such as your GP, spiritual leaders, psychologists, social workers, support organizations and/or mental health organizations.

→ **Keep it simple.**

Remember that providing support doesn't have to be complicated. It often involves simple gestures like spending time together, having a cup of tea, chatting about day-to-day life, enjoying a laugh together or a hug.

→ **Take care of yourself.**

It can be very trying looking after someone else and sometimes, we forget to look after ourselves. Be aware of your own health – physical and mental. If you're feeling run down or stressed, talk to a doctor and seek support from others.

THE SILVER LINING

It may help to know that the vast majority of people involved in a disaster recover by drawing on personal strengths and the love and support of family members, friends, neighbours and the wider community. Often, there can be positive outcomes despite the tragedy. Many people who have lived through a disaster develop new skills and view themselves and their families in a more positive light, place less importance on material possessions, develop closer bonds with their community and feel a sense of pride in their recovery.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Canadian Mental Health Association: For links to support and resources in your area.

Canadian Psychological Association: For links to important information and psychologists in your area.

Canadian Association of Social Workers: To find a social worker in your area.
1-855-729-CASW (2279)

Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association: To find a certified (registered) counsellor in your area.

2-1-1: Call 211 for community-based health and social services.

Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868

Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention: For links to crisis centres in your province or territory.

First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line: 1-855-242-3310

Public Health Agency of Canada: For additional supportive resources and links to your provincial and territorial health ministry.

Public Safety Canada: For more information and links to provincial and territorial emergency management.

WORKSHEET 1: CHOOSING ENJOYABLE ACTIVITIES

After a disaster, people often stop doing things that used to be enjoyable, rewarding or personally meaningful. It's hard to remember to take time for yourself, but taking the time to engage in pleasant activities is important.

There are so many tasks people must carry out following a disaster. Trying to take care of all the details while you may be coping with difficult feelings can quickly drain your emotional and physical energy. By taking care of yourself, eventually you will not only feel better, you will be able to do all of those day-to-day things that must be done.

Some activities to consider:

INDOOR ACTIVITIES	OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES	SOCIAL ACTIVITIES	REBUILDING ACTIVITIES
Reading	Going for a walk	Calling a friend	Fixing up a park, playground
Drawing/painting	Playing a sport	Lunch with a friend	Doing something as a tribute to disaster victims
Listening to music	Visiting a park	Contacting family	Cleaning a neighbour's yard
Watching a movie	Walking a dog	Meeting new people	Helping in a fundraiser
Writing in a journal	Gardening	Learning a new hobby	Minding a friend's children
Computer time (games, internet)	Swimming	Emailing, texting, blogging, chatting online	Helping to repair a community building

This list is intended to give you ideas about things that you might enjoy doing. You do not need to stick to the things on the list. Take some time to pick some activities you want to try or consider a few that are not included on this list. It's helpful to pick at least one activity you can do by yourself and one social activity that involves someone else. Think about activities that you have enjoyed or found meaningful in the past.

STEP 1: REVIEW THE ACTIVITY LIST

- Create a list of at least five activities that you want to try. Think about some of the things that worked in the past to make you feel better.

STEP 2: PICK AN ACTIVITY TO DO

- You may pick more than one, but at least pick one. Find a day and a time when you can engage in this activity over the next week. Write it in on the calendar below.

MONDAY	
TUESDAY	
WEDNESDAY	
THURSDAY	
FRIDAY	
SATURDAY	
SUNDAY	

STEP 3: MAKE A PLAN

Take a few minutes to think about what you need to do to make sure that you will be able to do the activity that you have chosen. Review the questions below and make them part of your plan.

- Do you want or need to ask someone to do this activity with you?
- Do you need anything to help you do this activity (e.g. sports equipment)?
- How will you handle any feelings you might have that may make it difficult for you to engage in the activity? (Some of these feelings might include grief or loss, lack of energy, or guilt about doing an enjoyable activity when there are other important tasks you need to complete.)

WORKSHEET 2: PROBLEM SOLVING

This worksheet will help you to break down problems into more manageable pieces, help you to prioritise problems and decide the best action to take.

STEP 1: DEFINE THE PROBLEM

→ What is the problem I want to work on first?

If you need to narrow down which problem to focus on first, it can help to ask yourself:

- Which problem is really bothering me the most?
- Is there one that I really need to deal with sooner than the others?
- Is there one that is getting worse? Is there a problem that I feel most comfortable working on first?

→ Take a minute to ask yourself these questions about the problem:

- | | |
|---|----------|
| a. Is it happening to me/Is it between me and someone else? | yes / no |
| b. Is it happening to someone else? | yes / no |
| c. Is it happening between two or more other people? | yes / no |

(If you circled 'yes' to a, this is likely to be a good problem for you to work on. If you circled 'yes' to b or c, this may not be a problem that you can fix. This may be a situation for someone else to work on.)

STEP 2: SET THE GOAL

→ What do I hope to see happen if the problem gets resolved?

→ What would a successful outcome to this problem look like to me?

Sometimes, a problem can be too big to tackle all at once. Ask yourself:

→ What pieces or steps could I break the problem into to make it more manageable?

STEP 3: BRAINSTORMING

→ What are some possible solutions to the problem?

(Don't judge your ideas. Write down any solution that comes to mind, even those solutions that may not have worked in the past or that sound unrealistic).

STEP 4: EVALUATE AND CHOOSE THE BEST SOLUTIONS

→ What are the best solutions from your brainstorming list?

It may be helpful to ask the opinion of someone you trust.

STEP 5: MAKE IT HAPPEN

→ Which action steps will I commit to in the next several days?

THE CANADIAN RED CROSS SOCIETY

Visit redcross.ca for more information on how to contact your local Red Cross office.

