



## Tips for Supporting Children in Disasters

Natural, manmade and technological disasters can have overwhelming effects on communities. Along with the physical destruction a disaster may leave, additional challenges to recovery may be invisible at first glance or remain unvoiced. To address these needs, Save the Children would like to share its psychosocial guidance with parents and guardians.

A disaster is a frightening event for children of all ages and can leave your children or the children you care for feeling scared, insecure, sad and angry. It is normal for children to show some changes in their behavior, thoughts and feelings during and after such events. Included here are some reactions you may see in your child or the children you care for according to their age, as well as ways you can support them and yourself.

### Remember to take care of you!

*When parents or guardians are stressed, anxious or upset, children feel this too. Children do better when the adults around them are confident, calm and reassuring. Take extra care of yourself—your own health and emotions—so that you will be better able to care for your children.*

## Tips for Parents and Guardians

As a parent or guardian, the care and support you give to your child in times of crisis is very important to his or her recovery. The way you respond to the situation also shapes their thoughts, feelings and reactions to the stress and danger you may face. Your attention and protection are more important now than ever, as children recover from recent events and cope with new challenges.

### Infants

Infants are completely dependent on adults for their survival and care. Parents and guardians can help infants feel safe and secure by being nurturing and making sure their physical needs, including feeding, changing and soothing, are met in a consistent way. Signs that an infant is under stress are:

- Fussy and difficult to soothe
- Cries excessively
- Sleeping and eating problems
- Less active or responsive than usual
- Withdrawn or quiet
- Delays in reaching important milestones (smiling, sitting, crawling, walking)

What you can do for your infant:

- Keep on a regular feeding and sleeping schedule.
- Keep the infant warm and safe.
- Try to keep the infant away from loud noises, chaos and conflict.
- Speak to the infant in a calm, soft voice.
- Hug and cuddle the infant.
- Give the infant attention to stimulate their learning and growth.
- Be sure the baby gets all immunizations and regular checkups with a doctor.
- If your baby is having extreme problems or not growing properly, seek professional help.

### Changes in Play

*Remember that play is very important for children—it is like their “work.” They may work out fears and anxieties through their play. Their play may be more aggressive, or they may repeatedly play out events that happened during the disaster. Sometimes they give a different ending to an event—like being able to rescue someone or something—which can help them feel more in control. Repetition is normal, but be on the look out for children becoming stuck. If you notice that your child is distressed or distressing other children with his/ her play, redirect him/ her to a new activity or game.*

### Very Young Children

#### Toddlers

During the toddler stage, children are learning many new things (like toilet training) and exploring their environment. They may venture out a little, but come back frequently to their parents or guardians for reassurance and protection. They need adults close to them to feel safe in times of danger.

#### Preschool Children

Preschool children are becoming more social (making friends) and are developing new abilities to do things (drawing, talking more, learning the alphabet). They may feel powerless in a disaster, and feel frightened of both real and imaginary dangers. They need their parents or guardians to make them feel safe and protected.

Common signs of stress for toddlers and preschool aged children:

- Sleeping and eating problems
- Temper tantrums and irritability

- Being defiant, frequently saying “no!”
- Getting very upset over small injuries
- Being afraid the disaster will happen again
- Clinging to parents or guardians, separation anxiety
- More fearful than usual (of the dark, strangers)

# Strategies for Supporting and Talking to Very Young Children

## Things You Can Do

### Care & Protection

- Repeatedly reassure your children of their safety and your love for them.
- Avoid separating young children from their primary caregivers for very long periods.
- Minimize exposure to scary images on television and adult conversations about the disaster and its devastation.
- Give extra attention and time at bedtime. Children may become more anxious about separating from you, particularly at bedtime. They may need you to stay with them a little longer before falling asleep. Tell stories or read favorite books together, and make sure your children have night-lights. Spending more time together with children when they are awake can help them to feel more secure at night.

### Normal Routines & Reassurance

- Maintain regular routines and rituals. Have set times for bedtime and mealtimes. As much as possible, have children go to bed in the same place each night. Structure and routine help children feel secure.
- Remember that some temper tantrums and aggressive behavior may happen because the child is distressed about the disaster. Set firm rules and consequences for overly aggressive behavior, but do not shout at or hit the child. Stay in control.
- Help children see the good things in the world around them.

### Preparing to talk to children

- Care for yourself first and you will be better able to care for you children.
- Take some time to process your own reactions and feelings before talking with children.
- Anticipate questions and prepare ahead of time. Know what you want to say and how you want to say it.
- Your children may not want to disturb you with their own worries. Give your children opportunities to ask questions and answer in a reassuring way.

Reassure your child of your love and protection. You can say, “**You’re safe now and I’m here to protect you.**”

Explain what happened in ways that your child can understand, appropriate to their age. Young children need reassurance and simple answers without overwhelming details. Be honest and clear.

Children may express strong feelings of anger, fear, or sadness. These are natural emotions for a child after a scary event like a disaster. To help them express their feelings, you could say, “**When scary things happen, people have strong feelings, like being mad at everyone or being very sad. Would you like to sit here with your teddy bear until you’re feeling better?**”

### Things You Can Do

#### Responding to Feelings & Fears

- Take time to listen. Children may have many worries during and after a disaster. Listen and answer their questions as simply and honestly as you can. Correct any misunderstandings that may have come from other children.
- Some children express fears that the disaster will worsen, return, or get especially frightened during events that remind them of the disaster (e.g., rainstorms that remind them of a flood or hurricane). Give reassurance. If appropriate, explain that the event is over, they are in a secure setting, and that you are providing for their safety.
- With younger children, follow disaster-related conversations with a comforting activity or story to help them feel safe and calm.
- Allow children to be sad and cry; these are normal expressions of emotion.

#### Good Behavior & Positive Coping

- Give praise and encouragement for good behavior.
- Think of activities you can do together to express creativity, such as drawing or painting.
- Play relaxation games to help your children learn to breathe slowly and deeply, like blowing bubbles with dish soap and a wand, or blowing cotton balls across the table.
- Regressive behaviors such as thumb sucking and bedwetting are common for many children after a scary event and will decrease with time. Be patient with this. Do not criticize your child by calling them “babyish” or shaming them. Instead be comforting.

### Talking Tips

#### Nightmares and Night Terrors

During and after a frightening event, young children may experience nightmares or night terrors. With a nightmare, children will wake up frightened and upset and will often remember the dream. Acknowledge how scary a nightmare can be and reassure them they are safe. Help them to sort out reality and fantasy as they may imagine things to be worse than they really are.

You can say, “Bad dreams come from the thoughts inside our heads about being scared, not from real things that are happening.” Sit with them and reassure them that they are safe and you are there with them: “That sounds like a scary dream. Let’s think about some good things that you can dream about and I’ll stay here with you until you fall asleep.”

Night terrors are different from nightmares in that the child is partially awake, even if they are screaming, crying or trying to talk. They may not recognize you, and may even push you away.

Don’t try to wake the child, just stay with them and make sure they are safe until they wake up. They often will not remember the night terror, and once they are relaxed again, will go back to sleep.

Give reassurance if your child is feeling afraid that the disaster will return: “Even though it’s raining, that doesn’t mean another hurricane is happening. This is just a normal rain, and we need that to help the trees and flowers grow.”

### School-Age Children

School-age children are able to reason and understand things better than younger children and don’t rely as much on their imagination. They are better able to understand scary events like disasters and to remember what happened in a logical way. However, they often feel guilty or to blame for catastrophic events or for those they love getting hurt.

It’s not always easy to talk to children about experiences, thoughts and feelings following a disaster. Remember that you don’t have to fix everything for your child. While you can’t fix the situation, you can do small things to support your child. Your presence, listening, paying extra attention and providing extra comfort will help. You can help your child understand and deal with his or her experiences and feelings. With love and support, children will heal and recover in time.

Common signs of stress for school-age children:

- Wanting to stay close to parents or guardians
- Complaining of headaches, stomachaches or other physical problems
- Sleep problems and nightmares
- Changes in eating habits
- Difficulty with their schoolwork
- Aggression and fighting
- Nervousness and anxiety
- Feelings of guilt, that they caused bad things to happen
- Sadness and crying (grieving for things they have lost)
- Being silent or withdrawing from family and friends
- Losing interest in things they used to enjoy

### Strategies for Supporting and Talking to School-Age Children

Many of the things you can do for very young children are also helpful for school-age children:

- Minimizing exposure to scary images on television or in conversations.
- Giving extra attention at bedtime to make them feel more secure at night.
- Reassuring them during a frightening event (such as a storm) that the disaster is not happening again, as many children may become especially frightened by normal events that remind them of a disaster they have experienced—such as wind and rain after living through a hurricane.
- Praising good behavior.
- Playing relaxation games.

In addition, there are other specific things that are particularly helpful for children of school age:

### Things You Can Do

#### Establish Safety & Control

- Repeatedly reassure your children of their safety and your love for them.
- Take time to listen. Children may have many worries during and after a disaster. Listen and answer their questions as simply and honestly as you can. Correct any misunderstandings including those that may have come from other children at school.
- Give your children some control over their environment by letting them plan things such as meals and activities.

#### Promote Good Behavior & Positive Coping

- Encourage good health; including eating right, exercising and getting enough sleep.
- Help children see the good things in the world around them.
- Encourage children to express their thoughts and emotions creatively, through drawing, painting, writing and music. Think of creative things you can do together.
- Give factual information about what happened. Provide a learning experience by giving facts about the type of disaster children lived through, for example, to help children understand and have a sense of mastery about the event.

#### Set up Normal Routines

- Maintain regular routines and rituals. Have set times for bedtime and mealtimes. As much as possible, have children go to bed in the same place each night. Structure and routine help children feel secure.

### Talking Tips

- Reassure your child of your love and protection: “You’re safe now and I’ll always try to protect you.”
- Explain what happened in ways that your child can understand, depending on their age. Be honest and clear.
- Let your children choose topics of discussion including conversations about everyday events.
- Reassure your children that many adults are working to make sure that they are safe, to help the community recover and clean up debris, and to help families find permanent homes.
- Talk about what is happening in the family and in the community during family times such as mealtimes. Discuss opinions and ideas with your children.
- Remind your children of times when you’ve seen them successfully face a fear or accomplish something new (e.g., joining a new team or starting a new school). Let them know you have confidence that they are able to make it through this.

### Things You Can Do

- Maintain family rules and expectations. Focus on three rules that you don’t bend, but remember to allow a little flexibility in other areas.

- Be patient with extra reminders for chores as children may be more distracted. Understand that they may have trouble concentrating, which can affect their schoolwork. Be encouraging and spend some time helping them with homework.

### Addressing Thoughts & Feelings

- Allow children to be sad and cry; these are normal expressions of emotion.
- School-age children may also return to some behaviors from their earlier childhood, like thumb-sucking, bedwetting or wanting to sleep with you. Be patient and supportive, as this will improve with time. Try not to shame the child, as they are probably embarrassed enough that this is happening to them. You might say “That sometimes happens even to big kids who go through a scary event like a [tornado, fire, etc.]. It’s nothing to worry about.” You may allow your child to sleep with you for a little while and set a date for them to return to their own bed.
- Children may have more physical complaints, like headaches and stomachaches, that don’t have a medical basis. Sometimes this physical display can be the body’s way of coping with the emotional stress your child is feeling. Address the symptoms; however be aware that the child might learn to seek attention this way. Give comfort and reassurance and help the child put their worries into words. You might ask if they have something on their mind or anything worrying them. The headaches and stomachaches may get better with time.

### Talking Tips

When children are being aggressive or restless, you can say, “I know you didn’t mean to slam that door. It must be hard to be feeling so angry.” You can suggest taking a walk or playing a game to help them deal with the strong feelings.

When children are expressing strong feelings of anger, fear or sadness, remember to let them cry and be sad. Don’t expect them to be tough. Their feelings are natural and normal after such a big event, and this is an opportunity to help children understand and learn to manage their emotions. You could say, “When scary things happen, people have strong feelings, like being mad at everyone or being very sad. What kinds of feelings are you having? What can we/you do to start to feel better?”

Reassure children that they are not to blame: “Right now there are lots of children and parents who wish they had the power to change what is happening. But there wasn’t anything you could have done to prevent this. It’s not your fault and I’m proud of how brave you have been.” If they lost a pet in the event, you can say, “I know you miss Brownie so much, and I’m sorry for what happened, but it wasn’t your fault.”

### Things You Can Do

- School-age children often feel they are to blame when bad things happen. Reassure your children that the disaster and related events were not their fault in any way.

### Encourage Peer Support & Fun Activities

- Take time for fun! Help children lessen tension and boredom through play and games, especially games you can do together.
- Provide small and safe opportunities for children to help with recovery activities in the community.
- Give children opportunities to spend time with friends and to make new friends.

### Talking Tips

Be honest but reassuring with your children about how you're feeling. You don't need to hide your tears: "Sometimes I feel sad, and it's okay to feel sad and to cry" or "Sometimes I miss our house too." This reassures children that their own feelings are normal. You can follow this by telling or showing children what you do to feel better (e.g., thinking of happy things or doing something fun) and assuring them that you will all make it through together.

### When Children are Quiet or Withdrawn

Some children may not be ready to talk about their feelings. They may be silent, withdrawn and isolated. It's best not to force a child to talk when they are not ready. Instead, let them know that you are there to listen anytime, so that they will feel comfortable coming to you when they are ready to talk. To help children put feelings into words, you can spend some one-on-one time with your child and say for them what you think might be bothering them or that "most children feel when bad things like this happen." Although the child may not respond, they are most likely listening and processing what you are saying. These need only be brief conversations, but can be helpful to children unable to express their own fears. Other tips for helping quiet children are:

- If your child is being very quiet and is having trouble saying what is bothering him or her, you can say things such as, "Children can feel really sad when they lose their house." You can draw faces (or have them draw faces) for different feelings on paper plates and tell a story about each one, such as "Remember when we came home and found our house and had a sad face like this?"
- Sometimes children don't want to disturb their parents or guardians with their own worries.
- Give them opportunities to talk, saying things such as "I bet it was scary to see me hurt/upset/sad." Give them ways to let you know how they feel with statements such as "If you start to feel scared, come and take my hand. Then I'll know you need to tell me something."
- You can provide your children with things to draw or play with to express themselves and check in with their feelings. You can use their drawings or play as tools for discussion, saying things such as "This is a really scary picture. Were you scared when you saw the water?"
- If you notice your child repeatedly playing or drawing disaster-related events, you can say, "I notice that you draw lots of pictures of what happened. Tell me about this picture here." You can also encourage them to draw pictures of their home, school, community or other areas where they might feel safe, and say things such as "We're doing a lot of things to keep us safe."

### Teenagers

Teenagers are at an age when they try to grasp a larger sense of the world. They are beginning to learn about being an adult but at the same time don't have all of the knowledge and experiences to understand everything, especially something as complex as a disaster. They are also developing a sense of their own identity separate from their parents or guardians, which is why friends and peers are so important to them. However, they still need their parents or guardians to give them guidance, comfort and reassurance. They are better able than younger children to talk about their thoughts and feelings, and it is important to provide them opportunities to do this with you so they can make sense of what has happened.

Teenagers often feel invincible, like nothing can harm them, but a major disaster can make them feel vulnerable and scared.

Other common thoughts, feelings and behaviors of teenagers following a major disaster and in times of ongoing stress are:

- Preoccupation with the changes and losses occurring in their lives, their families and communities
- Feeling helpless and insecure
- Being judgmental and critical of adults
- Extreme mood shifts
- Acting invincible
- Risk-taking behaviors (e.g., drugs, alcohol, breaking rules, sex)
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Acting irritable and easily agitated
- Physical aches and pains
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Loss of interest in friends and/or usual activities
- Trouble at school: skipping school, fighting or breaking rules, poor grades

## Strategies for Supporting Teens: Be Real, Be Honest, Be There!

### Things You Can Do

#### Provide Guidance & Perspective

- Listen to your teens, and try not to lecture or interrupt them. Help them to distinguish between fact and opinion.
- Help them work through recent events by discussing your perspective and reactions with them.
- If your teen is experiencing extreme mood shifts and displaying anger, sulking, or blowing things out of proportion, remain calm. Reassure your teen that you expect them to do their best.
- Your teen may be engaging in risky or dangerous behaviors as a result of their feelings and fears. Let them know that you need them to check in more than usual right now, but that extra checking is temporary. Be clear about rules and setting expectations like getting in on time, and letting you know where they are. Tell them you love and care for them.
- Keep an open dialogue so your teenager will feel they can come to you with their fears and worries. Let them know how worried you are about their safety and well-being, and that you want them to call you if they're ever in trouble.

#### Show Extra Love, Support & Patience

- Be there to listen to your teens and hear them out. Don't force them to talk about feelings if they aren't comfortable, but let them know they can come to you anytime.
- Teens may withdraw from relationships. Be patient and let them know you respect their privacy. Find ways to reach out and engage them whenever possible so they can feel support from family and friends.

### Talking Tips

Let your teen know that they are not the only one with thoughts and feelings that are hard to deal with: “I was feeling the same thing... scared and helpless. Even though they may look calm on the outside, a lot of people feel like this when a disaster happens.”

Explain their feelings are normal at this time: “Many people feel like you do, angry and blaming themselves that they couldn’t do more. Remember you’re not at fault; there was nothing more we could have done.”

Try talking openly about tensions in the family: “Well, it’s completely normal for us to be crabby with each other given what we’ve been through and the challenges we’re still facing. I think overall we’re handling things well, and I’m glad we have each other.”

You might talk about the stress that you are all under: “We are all under so much stress these days. With all of these changes and uncertainty, we all feel more scared and angry. I’ll try to be more patient with you and I hope you’ll do the same with me.”

### Things You Can Do

- Remind your teens they are important members of the family and that you value them. Knowing their importance to everyone in the family helps remind them of their belonging and identity during uncertain times.
- Remind your teens of times when you’ve seen them successfully face a fear or accomplish something new (e.g., joining a new team or starting a new job). Let them know of your confidence in them, that they are able to make it through this.
- A sense of humor can be very helpful in coping and getting through difficult times. Discourage jokes that are disrespectful and overly cynical, while not cutting lines of communication.
- As with younger children, maintain family rules and expectations. Focus on three rules that you don’t bend, but remember to remain flexible on other things.

### Encourage Socializing & Volunteering

- Encourage teens to spend time with friends. Relationships with friends their own age are very important for teenagers, and help their social and emotional development. If friends are displaced and far away, find ways they can talk, write or visit each other.
- Help your teens to feel a sense of control over their environment by asking them to plan activities, meals, etc.
- Find ways for your teen to help in the recovery efforts. This helps them to feel more in control and confident, and gives them a positive outlet for their feelings.

### Talking Tips

Be real with your teen and keep the lines of communication open. “I’m sorry for being so irritable with you yesterday. I’m going to work harder on staying calm.”

Be honest when tough topics come up, and don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know.”

Take the opportunity to tell your teenager you appreciate them: “I really appreciated it when you were so calm when your brother got upset,” or “Thanks for playing that game with your little sister. She really looks up to you.”

You can encourage your teen to seek social support rather than isolate himself/herself: “Why don’t you give Sara a call and see how she’s doing?”

As you support your child during this recovery period, you may have begun to identify effective strategies for helping your children manage and cope with stress.

## When to Seek Help

As communities rebuild and recover, so will children and teens. Over time, you should see your children return to their normal selves. Problems at school, sadness and anxiety, or aggressive behavior are likely to get better with time and the return to normal routines. However, some children and teens will need extra help to recover from the disaster. Those who were in danger during the disaster, lost people or things important to them, or experienced major life changes may need extra support in moving on. Other children may have problems that don’t get better or even get worse with time, and they may also benefit from professional help. Consider seeking guidance or assistance from a doctor, social worker, counselor or psychologist if a child struggles with any of the following symptoms:

- Repeated and aggressive emotional outbursts
- Being extremely sad, excessive crying
- Withdrawing from others or usual activities for an extended time, showing a lack of emotion or feeling
- Extreme fears and worries that interfere with daily functioning
- Excessive hyperactivity
- Marked and prolonged problems with schoolwork
- Dangerous risk-taking behavior (recklessness, drug or alcohol abuse, risky sex, self-injury)
- Any child who talks about hurting or killing himself/herself or others, or who tries to hurt himself/herself. Take children seriously if they talk to you about suicide and seek help immediately.

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### Children’s Safety and Protection

After a major disaster, it is important to take special care of your child’s safety. Families may find themselves in unfamiliar territory, literally and metaphorically. It may be harder to know the safe areas for children to play. Be watchful of children playing near debris from the disaster and other health hazards. You and your child may encounter many new people, some displaced themselves and others working to help in recovery efforts. It’s important to know the people around your child; don’t entrust the care of your child to strangers.

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Just as children may be clingy and afraid to leave their parents or guardians, parents or guardians may also feel over-protective of their children after a natural disaster. Try to realistically assess what is safe and dangerous in your new environment. Remember it's important for your child to get back to regular routines, including getting back to school and having play time with friends. With time, as things get back to the normal and you all feel more comfortable, it will be easier to let go of your own fears and allow your child to do the things they used to do.

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## Taking Care of Yourself: Strategies to Cope and Stay Strong

Everyone faces adversity sometime in their life, and we learn and grow from these experiences. A disaster can be an overwhelming event at any age, but we all have inner resources—our own resiliency—and outer resources we can call on to see us through. Life-altering events are opportunities to reflect on where we have been and where we are going, and the things that bring meaning to our lives. Take some time to think not only about the losses and changes brought by the disaster, but also the gains from the experience. Perhaps you have learned not to “sweat the small stuff” or to be more flexible. Perhaps you have gained new friendships or become closer with neighbors or co-workers. Take time to reflect, understand and come to terms with this important event in your life, and then you will be better able to help children and others to do the same.

Taking care of yourself may require some creativity and adaptation. Some of the activities you used to do or places you used to go may no longer be accessible. Think about the things that have helped in the past, and where you can, try to put those in place today. Think of new things that might help you feel better day to day. Often it is the pile up of small stresses that make us feel overwhelmed; similarly it can be the small ways you learn to relax and stay healthy that will keep you resilient during this difficult time.

You will feel the effects of stress in your body. When under stress it is common to feel headaches, muscle tension, stomach upset and fatigue. To take care of yourself, remember...

- Eat regular and healthy meals
- Give yourself adequate time to rest and recover when you're sick
- Get enough rest
- Exercise
- Do things that you enjoy, take time for fun and relaxation
- Take breaks from the work and stress to release and recharge

## Taking Care of Your Mind

You may find you have many things on your mind and long to-do lists. Your mind also needs care and rest. Even for just 15 minutes a day, give yourself space for quiet reflection and a time away from people, phones and demands so you can refresh.

- Find activities that help you relax, such as breathing exercises, meditation, swimming, walking, stretching, yoga, prayer, listening to music or spending time in nature.

## PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

- Try to keep perspective: Recovery is a long process, but every day there are changes and improvements. Try to see the positives each day.
- Consider the extraordinary changes and challenges you have experienced and be patient with yourself.
- Focus on the small things you can do to improve the day to day, rather than putting your time and energy into things that are out of your control.
- Explore your creativity to make meaning of what has happened. Express your thoughts and feelings in new ways, such as journaling, painting, drawing, sculpting or music.
- Give yourself time for self-reflection and understanding. Practice spiritual self-care in the way that works best for you.

### Keep in Touch with Friends and Family

- Try not to isolate yourself and dwell on your feelings alone. More than ever, surround yourself with the important and caring people in your life.
- Identify the people, activities, places and things that are a comfort to you, and seek them out on a regular basis.
- Stay in touch with the important people in your life and accept their support and kindness.
- Talk with others who face similar challenges to know you are not alone and that others understand. Share the lessons you've learned for coping with the new challenges in your lives.
- Talk with your clergy, counselors or others who can provide comfort and help.

Reaching out to and helping others can help to counter your own feelings of helplessness. Small things—an encouraging word, running an errand or watching a child for someone, or being there to listen—are ways you can make a difference. Remember to be aware of your limitations too, and know when you need to focus more on caring for yourself.

### Outlets for Emotions

Overwhelming emotions are common following major events, big changes and ongoing stress. Take time to deal with and to express your own feelings.

- **Crying:** It's all right to cry and to laugh. You may find yourself crying in front of your children. Explain that you feel sad sometimes too, that it's okay to cry, and what you do to feel better. This can be an opportunity to help children to understand and manage their own sad feelings.
- **Anger:** Many people feel very angry during and after a disaster—the situation feels unfair and unjust and recovery and rebuilding can be fraught with problems. Although anger is a natural and healthy emotion, be careful of intense anger and aggression that can hurt others and cause problems at home or on the job. Find healthy and safe ways to express frustration and anger, such as taking a walk or doing some physical activity.
- **Shame and Blame:** After a disaster, many people think about the things they wished they had done, or done differently. In a time of crisis, you make the best decision you can with you the information you have at the moment. There was no way to know how things might turn out. Forgive yourself, let go and move forward.
- **Survivor Guilt:** Many people who survive disasters feel guilty that they, their families and homes are intact, when others lost so much. Feelings of guilt are actually a reflection of your compassion and human ability to feel others' pain.

### Getting Back to Work

The return to work can be both a relief and a challenge. Work helps give a regular structure to life, and something meaningful and productive to look forward to. It can also be difficult to get back to work when your life may still be disrupted, and you may lack energy, focus and concentration. Try these things to make the return to work easier:

- Create a welcoming work environment with things that remind you of the beauty in your life. Try placing photos, fresh flowers or meaningful objects on your desk.
- Have reasonable expectations for what you are able to do right now. Stay in touch with supervisors so they are aware of any challenges you are facing.
- Don't overwork – keep regular hours.
- At times when you find it hard to concentrate, try doing menial or repetitive tasks.
- Be patient and supportive with co-workers who are also under stress. Be there for each other.

### Be Aware of “Pitfalls”

With stress and trauma often comes a great deal of pain. Dealing with the pain is an important part of self-care and recovery. However, some avenues of coping with pain can cause greater problems. Be careful of pitfalls and dangerous ways of dealing with stress:

- Unrealistic expectations of ourselves and others
- Working too much
- Dangerous behaviors like risky sex or driving too fast
- Drinking or self-medicating with drugs to numb the pain. Remember that alcohol can lower your mood, cause mood swings and interrupt your sleep cycle. Alcohol and drugs can strain relationships.

### When to Seek Help

Continue to remind yourself that these normal reactions are to be expected during times like these. If you find that symptoms are greatly impacting your ability to function at home or at work, and if they get worse or persist for more than three months, consider talking things over with a mental health professional, such as a psychologist, social worker, or counselor. In particular, if you are experiencing any of the following symptoms, a mental health professional can talk to you about ways to relieve the overwhelming stress.

- Feeling constantly on edge or in danger
- Rage, extreme irritability, or intense agitation
- Severe anxiety, worry or feelings of panic
- Severe depression marked by the inability to feel hope or pleasure; a lack of energy and motivation; feelings of worthlessness
- Abuse of alcohol, prescription drugs, and/or illegal drugs
- Repeated and intrusive memories or “flashbacks” of disaster-related events
- Emotional numbing—feeling “empty”
- Feeling extremely helpless

If you have thoughts of hurting yourself or others, it is important that you seek help for your safety and the safety of others.

Even if you don't find yourself experiencing the types of things listed above, seeking the guidance of a mental health professional might be the right thing for you to do. These are extraordinary times that call for using all of our resources for strength and recovery. Give yourself permission to access those resources, to take care of yourself. Counselors, social workers and psychologists can work together with you to identify strategies and plans for staying strong and continuing to support your friends and family through this time.

### Let's Take a Breather...

Relaxation tools help you to center and calm yourself, even on stressful days, in order to keep your mind focused and your body functioning well. Breath is the key to relaxation. Shallow breathing can leave a person feeling cold or sweaty, lightheaded and with a fast heartbeat. As you learn to breathe slowly and deeply, your muscles automatically relax each time you exhale and your mind will become clear.

When you first start to practice relaxation, you may become more aware of negative or painful sensations. However, continuing to practice relaxation in a way that is challenging and tolerable can help you feel better. Remember, you don't have to change how you're feeling or change your environment—and you probably can't.

The key to relaxation is just to be quiet and present with whatever you're feeling and thinking in the moment. Try these basic techniques during your daily schedule:

- Identify a word, sound or phrase that you can repeat to yourself while sitting quietly with your eyes closed.
- Close your eyes and focus on your breathing, giving attention to inhaling and releasing each breath.
- Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and visualize yourself in a soothing place such as a garden or beach. Use all of your senses to place yourself in the scene.
- Try Progressive Muscle Relaxation: systematically tense and relax different body muscles from toes to head. Feel the difference between tension and real relaxation in your body.
- Slow down your breathing and count ten breaths, from ten to one, feeling more relaxed each time you exhale.
- Stand up and stretch. Rotate your shoulders and your head.
- Take a moment to walk around the room or down the hall.

### Important Numbers

**1-800-273-TALK** National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

**1-800-656-HOPE** National Sexual Assault Hotline

**1-800-789-2647** National Mental Health Information Center

A confidential hotline to speak with trained mental health professionals who can assist with information and local referrals