

# When Terrible Things Happen

## *What you may experience*

### Immediate Reactions

There are a wide variety of positive and negative reactions that survivors can experience during and immediately after a disaster. These include:

Domain	Negative Responses	Positive Responses
Cognitive	Confusion, disorientation, worry, intrusive thoughts and images, self-blame	Determination and resolve, sharper perception, courage, optimism, faith
Emotional	Shock, sorrow, grief, sadness, fear, anger, numb, irritability, guilt and shame	Feeling involved, challenged, mobilized
Social	Extreme withdrawal, interpersonal conflict	Social connectedness, altruistic helping behaviors
Physiological	Fatigue, headache, muscle tension, stomachache, increased heart rate, exaggerated startle response, difficulties sleeping	Alertness, readiness to respond, Increased energy

### Common negative reactions that may continue include:

#### *Intrusive reactions*

- ⇒ Distressing thoughts or images of the event while awake or dreaming
- ⇒ Upsetting emotional or physical reactions to reminders of the experience
- ⇒ Feeling like the experience is happening all over again (“flashback”)

#### *Avoidance and withdrawal reactions*

- ⇒ Avoid talking, thinking, and having feelings about the traumatic event
- ⇒ Avoid reminders of the event (places and people connected to what happened)
- ⇒ Restricted emotions; feeling numb
- ⇒ Feelings of detachment and estrangement from others; social withdrawal
- ⇒ Loss of interest in usually pleasurable activities

#### *Physical arousal reactions*

- ⇒ Constantly being “on the lookout” for danger, startling easily, or being jumpy
- ⇒ Irritability or outbursts of anger, feeling “on edge”
- ⇒ Difficulty falling or staying asleep, problems concentrating or paying attention

#### *Reactions to trauma and loss reminders*

- ⇒ Reactions to places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that are reminders of the disaster
- ⇒ Reminders can bring on distressing mental images, thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions
- ⇒ Common examples include: sudden loud noises, sirens, locations where the disaster occurred, seeing people with disabilities, funerals, anniversaries of the disaster, and television/radio news about the disaster

*Positive Changes in Priorities, Worldview, or Expectations:*

- ⇒ Enhanced appreciation that family and friends are precious and important
- ⇒ Meeting the challenge of addressing difficulties (by taking positive actions steps, changing the focus of thoughts, using humor, acceptance)
- ⇒ Shifting expectations about what to expect from day to day and about what is considered a “good day”
- ⇒ Shifting priorities to focus more on quality time with family or friends
- ⇒ Increased commitment to self, family, friends, and spiritual/religious faith

*When a Loved One Dies, Common Reactions Include:*

- ⇒ Feeling confused, numb, disbelief, bewildered, or lost
- ⇒ Feeling angry at the person who dies or at people considered responsible for the death
- ⇒ Strong physical reactions such as nausea, fatigue, shakiness, and muscle weakness
- ⇒ Feeling guilty for still being alive
- ⇒ Intense emotions such as extreme sadness, anger, or fear
- ⇒ Increased risk for physical illness and injury
- ⇒ Decreased productivity or difficulties making decisions
- ⇒ Having thoughts about the person who died, even when you don’t want to
- ⇒ Longing, missing, and wanting to search for the person who died
- ⇒ Children and adolescents are particularly likely to worry that they or a parent might die
- ⇒ Children and adolescents may become anxious when separated from caregivers or other loved ones

**What Helps**

- Talking to another person for support or spending time with others
- Engaging in positive distracting activities (sports, hobbies, reading, etc)
- Getting adequate rest and eating healthy meals
- Trying to maintain a normal schedule
- Scheduling pleasant activities
- Taking breaks
- Reminiscing about a loved one who has died
- Focusing on something practical that you can do right now to manage the situation better
- Using relaxation methods (breathing exercises, meditation, calming self-talk, soothing music)
- Participating in a support group
- Exercising in moderation
- Keeping a journal
- Seeking counseling

**What Doesn’t Help**

- Using alcohol or drugs to cope
- Extreme withdrawal from family or friends
- Overeating or failing to eat
- Withdrawing from pleasant activities
- Working too much
- Violence or conflict
- Doing risky things (driving recklessly, substance abuse, not taking adequate precautions)
- Blaming others
- Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking about the event or death of a loved one
- Not taking care of yourself
- Excessive TV or computer games



## Coping with Grief

Grief can be a powerful and challenging life experience. Each person has their own unique way of reacting to a loss, but some typical feelings and reactions can include:

- Shock
- Denial
- Anger
- Guilt
- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Fear
- Disbelief
- Remorse
- Relief
- Helplessness
- Yearning/Separation
- Confusion
- Acceptance
- Anxiety, panic
- Numbness
- Resentment, blame
- Regret

### You may experience physiological and behavioral reactions such as:

- Change in sleep
- Change in appetite
- Low energy
- Lowered immunity
- Difficulty concentrating and/or disorganization
- Disinterest in schoolwork, self-care, or normally pleasurable activities
- Isolation or social withdrawal
- Somatic complaints (e.g., stomachaches, headaches, back pain, neck pain)
- Substance abuse
- Quitting a job, school, or sport

### To cope with grief...

- Do what is right for you. Go at your own pace.
- **Seek out support people in your life** (classmates, teammates, family, friends, religious, counselors)
- Remember that accepting the loss is a Process with ups and downs
- Find ways to express and release emotions such as talking, journaling, crying

### Signs you may need more support to work through your grief could include:

- Feelings of panic and/or frenzy
- Feeling overwhelmed or incapacitated by fear and grief
- Emotional numbness that doesn't go away
- Going to extremes to avoid thinking about the loss (e.g., substance abuse, immersing self in work)
- Intense emotions often daily 6 months after the loss
- Obsessive thoughts of death or suicide
- Nightmares or flashbacks with emotional intensity 1 month after loss
- Intense feelings of depression that last longer than 3 weeks

**If you need more support contact the  
UCF Counseling and Psychological Services at 407-823-2811**



# CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

## SEEKING SOCIAL SUPPORT

Making contact with others can help reduce feelings of distress. Children and adolescents can benefit from spending some time with other similar-age peers. Connections can be with family, friends, or others who are coping with the same traumatic event.

### Social Support Options

- Spouse or partner
- Trusted family friend
- Close friend
- Priest, Rabbi, or other clergy
- Pet
- Doctor or Nurse
- Crisis counselor or other counselor
- Support group
- Co-worker

### Do...

- Decide carefully whom to talk to
- Decide ahead of time what you want to discuss
- Choose the right time and place
- Start by talking about practical things
- Let others know you need to talk or just to be with them
- Talk about painful thoughts and feelings when you're ready
- Ask others if it's a good time to talk
- Tell others you appreciate them listening
- Tell others what you need or how they could help— one main thing that would help you right

### Don't...

- Keep quiet because you don't want to upset others
- Keep quiet because you're worried about being a burden
- Assume that others don't want to listen
- Wait until you're stressed or exhausted that you can't fully benefit from help

## WAYS TO GET CONNECTED

- *Calling friends or family on the phone*
- *Increasing contact with existing acquaintances and friends*
- *Renewing or beginning involvement in church, synagogue, or other religious group activities*
- *Getting involved with a support group*
- *Getting involved in community recovery activities*



**BE WELL**  
**DO WELL**

## GIVING SOCIAL SUPPORT

You can help family members and friends cope with the disaster by spending time with them and listening carefully. Most people recover better when they feel connected to others who care about them. Some people choose not to talk about their experiences very much, and others may need to discuss their experiences. For some, talking about things that happened because of the disaster can help them seem less overwhelming. For others, just spending time with people one feels close to and accepted by, without having to talk, can feel best.

### Reasons Why People May Avoid Social Support

- Not knowing what they need
- Feeling embarrassed or “weak
- Feeling they will lose control
- Not wanting to burden others
- Feeling that others will be disappointed or judgmental
- Doubting it will be helpful, or that others won’t understand
- Having tried to get help and felt that it wasn’t there before
- Wanting to avoid thinking or feeling about the event

### Good Things to Do When Giving Support

- Show interest, attention, and care
- Find an uninterrupted time and place to talk
- Be free of expectations or judgments
- Show respect for individuals reactions and ways of coping
- Acknowledge that this type of stress can take time to resolve
- Help brainstorm positive ways to deal with their reactions
- Talk about acceptable reactions to disasters, and healthy coping
- Believe that the person is capable of recovery
- Offer to talk or spend time together as many times as needed

### Things That Interfere with Giving Support

- Rushing to tell someone that they will be okay or that they should just “get over it”
- Discussing your own personal experiences without listening to the other person’s story
- Stopping the person from talking about what is bothering them
- Acting like someone is weak or exaggerating because they aren’t coping as well as you
- Giving advice without listening to the person’s concerns or asking what works for them
- Telling them they were lucky that it wasn’t worse

### When Your Support is Not Enough

- Let the person know that experts think that avoidance and withdrawal are likely to increase distress, and social support helps recovery
- Encourage the person to get involved in a support group with others with similar
- Encourage the person to talk with a counselor, clergy, or medical professional, and offer to accompany them
- Enlist help from others in your social circle so that you all take part in being supportive

## Positive Self Care after a Traumatic Event

*When you experience a traumatic event there are things you can do to cope! Try....*

**Accepting your feelings** as normal responses to an abnormal event; remind yourself that a variety of reactions are normal and don't label yourself as "crazy" or "not handling things well"

**Paying close attention** to your body and how you feel; remain aware of what you are feeling both physically and emotionally

**Setting limits;** limit your exposure to media reports; identify what responsibilities and actions are yours and what things are out of your control; accept and assert your limitations

**Structuring your time** and keeping busy; set reasonable goals for each day and make daily life decisions; avoid making any major decisions or life changes too soon

**Talking and sharing** your worries or concerns with others; reach out and stay connected to your family and friends

**Eating right and exercising;** physical activity will release tension and enhance your mood; good nutrition will help you meet the physical and emotional demands of this experience

**Avoiding substance use;** alcohol and drugs give only temporary relief and in the long run will likely increase your stress level; avoid caffeine

**Relaxing and sleeping** on a regular schedule; get as much sleep as possible and take time to relax; do something calming or pleasurable each day; give yourself time to stop and take a few deep breaths

**Listening to your thoughts;** monitor negative thinking and counter it by sharing your fears and concerns with others and replacing these thoughts with more realistic, positive thoughts

**Accessing counseling;** call or come by the **UCF Counseling & Psychological Services** for support



## Tips for Self Care

- ❖ **Pay Attention** - Pay attention to your body and how you feel. You can take action if you remain aware of what you are feeling.
- ❖ **Talk** - Talk, Talk Talk!!! Sharing your worries or concerns with others help you gain perspective and prevent serious effects of stress later.
- ❖ **Manage Your Time** - Learn to manage your time effectively. Schedule deadlines and work hours, but also schedule time for fun and relaxation.
- ❖ **Set Limits** - Identify what responsibilities and actions are yours and what things are in your control, and then accept and assert your limitations.
- ❖ **Exercise** - physical activity helps us to release tension, build a sense of confidence in ourselves, and enhance our moods.
- ❖ **Eat Right** - Nurture your body and mind by eating healthy foods and taking time to enjoy your meals.
- ❖ **Avoid Substance Use** - Alcohol and drugs give only temporary relief and in the long run will likely increase your stress level. Avoid caffeinated teas, coffee, sodas as well as tobacco products and diet pills. These substances are stimulants which will increase your stress level.
- ❖ **Breathe** - Don't forget to breathe. Allow yourself time to stop and take a few deep breaths. Practice letting air fully fill your lungs and be released.
- ❖ **Relax** - Make time to relax and have fun! We all need to relax, even when we are busy. Your body cannot tolerate being stressed all the time. Identify relaxing activities and make time for them - even if it's only 10 minutes in the day.
- ❖ **Listen To Your Thoughts** - Are they negative, critical, pressuring you? Find other thoughts to counter these and reduce stress.
- ❖ **Counseling** - If you would like help in dealing with any of these things, make an appointment to speak with a professional. They can assist you in stress management, relaxation strategies and support.

### **Students:**

- UCF Counseling Center  
407-823-2811
- Biofeedback at the UCF  
Wellness Center  
407-823-5841

### **Faculty & Staff:**

- Employee Assistance  
Program (EAP) 407-788-8822