

Coping with Tragedy: Dealing With Stress

If your community has been hit by a natural disaster or violent event, you're probably trying to pick up the pieces and make sense of what happened. An event such as this creates a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety for those both directly and indirectly affected. In the days and weeks to come, you may begin having some of these common reactions:

- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation; difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Apathy and emotional numbing
- Nightmares and reoccurring thoughts about the event
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness and depression
- Feeling powerless
- Changes in eating patterns; loss of appetite or overeating
- Excessive crying
- Headaches, back pains and stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping or falling asleep
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs

Tips for Coping

It's normal to have difficulty managing your feelings after major tragedies. Because everyone experiences stress differently, don't compare yourself with others around you or judge other people's reactions and emotions. Here are some tips for coping with stress:

- **Talk about it.** By talking with others about the event, you can relieve stress and realize that others share your experience and feelings.
- **Spend time with friends and family.** They can help you through this tough time. If your family lives outside the area, stay in touch by phone if possible. If you have children, encourage them to share their feelings and concerns with you.
- **Take care of yourself.** Get as much rest and exercise as possible. Try to continue your religious practices, or centering activities.
- **Take one thing at a time.** Getting things back to normal can seem impossible. Break the job up into doable tasks. Complete that task first and then move on to the next one. Completing each task will give you a sense of accomplishment and make things seem less overwhelming.
- **If you can, help.** Give blood, help prepare meals for others including the elderly. Volunteer to help clean up or rebuild your community. Read to children in the shelter. Helping others can give you a sense of purpose in a situation that feels beyond control.
- **Avoid drugs and excessive drinking.** Drugs and alcohol may seem to help you feel better, but in the long run they generally create additional problems that compound the stress you're already feeling.
- **Ask for help if you need it.** If your stress is so strong it gets in the way of your daily life, talk with someone. Don't try to go it alone. You can start with a trusted friend, relative or minister. You may want to talk with a mental health professional to discuss how well you are coping with recent events. This could be especially important for people who had existing mental health problems or those who've survived past trauma. You could also join a support group. Don't try to go it alone. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness.

For More Information:

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to www.mhacolorado.org.