

# **Emotional First Aid**

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## **Do's and Don'ts**

Get together with family and friends and support each other.

Organize and meet in community groups in neighborhoods, YMCAs and religious centers.

Don't be isolated.

Try to get the information about your loved ones ASAP, watch the news for limited times and then turn it off for a while. You can put the TV on every two hours to get the information you need, but do not get hooked on its traumatic images.

It is crucial to refocus on your resources, anything that helps you feel calmer, stronger and more grounded refocus on all your support systems. Do things that keep your mind occupied, such as watching a movie, knitting, gardening, cooking, playing with children or pets or going in nature.

Stay active and volunteer help in the hospitals or give blood. You can send money or help staff help lines for distressed people.

Encourage people and yourself not to tell their stories in a repetitive way which ultimately deepens the trauma, and instead support and hear each other about this real tragedy/catastrophe, but with interruptions of the story from beginning to end. Feel your feelings and allow your emotions to be expressed in a rational framework and in productive actions that you may chose to take. This will help you to process feelings without overwhelming yourself and not get stuck in obsessive thinking.

## **Psychological Response**

People can have many different reactions to the tragedy.

Some will be in shock, stunned and dissociated for a while. They may feel numb and cut off from the terror and pain.

Children may become 'clingly' and have nightmares. Alternatively, they may act out aggressively. This is normal. It might last a few days or more but it will pass. They need to be reassured and feel protected.

People may feel fear and deep sorrow, confusion, anger and helplessness. These feelings are normal too and will pass.

People may feel anxious, hyper-vigilant ('on guard') and easily irritated. They need to engage in activities and creative expression that calms them. Being with family members and friends can help calming.

## **Physiological Response**

It is natural to have a physical reaction to this stress, so don't let these scare you. It is good to recognize signs of 'activation' and not to be scared by them:

- heart beating faster
- difficulty breathing
- blood pressure going up

- stomach tightening, knot in the throat
- skin cold and racy thoughts
- these reactions will dissipate-go away-if we don't fight them
- people might experience some difficulty sleeping, wanting to eat too much, salty or sweet food, and might want to engage in addictive behaviors such as excessive use of alcohol or drugs

Symptoms can be very diverse. They can be stable, or come and go. They can occur in clusters. Some people's old unresolved traumas may get re-triggered. Their sense of safety and trust may get shaken. They need to remind themselves of their names, their actual age and today's date and place.

The best 'antidote' is to try to be aware of these and other impulses, and to be accepting that you are deeply upset-and that it will pass.

### **Helpful Response**

We can help our nervous system recuperate its balance by understanding how it discharges when it is over-stimulated. Some examples of this are:

- trembling, shaking or sweating
- warmth in our body
- stomach gurgling
- breathing deeply
- crying or laughing

These are good, it means that we are discharging some of this the energy and coming back into balance. Mostly, we want to just observe what's happening in our body without judgment, just watching and understanding that our body has the innate ability to regain its balance if we just let it feel what it feels, and give it the time to do what it wants to do.

### **What to Do**

It is very important to stay 'grounded.' If you are feeling disoriented, confused, upset and in disbelief, you can do the following exercise:

Sit on a chair, feel your feet on the ground, press on your thighs, feel your behind on the seat, and your back supported by the chair; look around you and pick six objects that have red or blue. This should allow you to feel in the present, more grounded and in your body. Notice how your breath gets deeper and calmer. You may want to go outdoors and find a peaceful place to sit on the grass. As you do, feel how your bottom can be held and supported by the ground.

Here is an exercise that will allow you to feel your body as a 'container' to hold your feelings.

Gently pat the different parts of your body with your hand, with a loose wrist. Your body may feel more tingling, more alive, sharp, you may feel more connected to your feelings.

Another exercise is to tense your muscles, each group at a time. Hold your shoulders with arms across your chest, tighten your grip on them and pat your arms up and down. Do the same with your legs, tighten them and hold them from the outside, patting through their length. Tighten your back, tighten your front, then gently release the tension. This may help you or your loved

one feel more balanced.

Sports, aerobics and weight training help avoid depression and are a channel for aggression.

If you believe in prayer or in some sort of greater power, pray for the rest of the souls of the dead, for the healing of the wounded, for consolation for the grieving. Pray for peace, for understanding and wisdom and for the forces of goodness to prevail. Do not give up faith in the ultimate goodness of being and keep your trust in humanity.

And last, just know that we, humans, are extremely resilient and have been able to recuperate from the most horrendous tragedies. Furthermore we have the ability to let ourselves be transformed by our traumas, when we heal them and open ourselves to the possibility.