



COPING IN TIMES OF
Crisis or
DISASTER



INFORMATION & TIPS



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SUPPORTED BY THE SALVATION ARMY COUNSELLING SERVICE



Introduction

Natural disasters. War and the threat of war. Death. Tragedy. Disease. Terrorist warnings and attacks.

These events and others can cause anxiety, fear, stress.

Even indirect exposure through media coverage of events, horrific headlines and images of the chaos in our world can quickly take its toll upon our sense of wellbeing.

We all respond differently to disturbing or distressing news and events. This booklet aims to help you identify some of the common signs of stress in yourself and/ or loved ones, provide tips for coping and suggest when professional help may be required.



What is Critical Incident Stress?

General stress/ anxiety

Stress can be described as the pressures experienced in day-to-day living. These can be positive or negative. However, if everyday stress is allowed to build up over time, it is possible for more serious problems to develop.

Acute stress

Acute or Critical Incident Stress (CIS) is the stress response that may arise from disasters, crises or critical incidents.

This may cause a person to have strong emotional reactions and may overwhelm their ability to cope well, either in the short term, or the long term.

A disaster/ crisis/ critical incident is usually sudden and out of the ordinary. It may involve death or serious injury.

Examples include:

- Deaths that were sudden, violent or occurred in horrifying circumstances – e.g. murder, suicide, tragic accident
- Death or injury to a child in particularly tragic circumstances
- Major disasters or tragic accidents/ events, particularly those incidents involving serious injury, loss of life or home and/ or property; or the fear of loss of life, home, or property
- Any incident involving a large number of casualties
- Warfare or threats of war
- Terrorist attacks or threats
- Medical emergencies
- Witnessing a critical incident
- Exposure to gruesome sights
- Failure to save a life, or failure to stop a critical incident from happening
- Threat to life or safety, or perceived threat to life or safety
- Incidents that bring back memories of past critical incidents
- Any serious threat, injury or loss or perceived serious threat, injury or loss.



ABOVE MAJOR DISASTERS ARE EXAMPLES OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS



In our communication era, even indirect exposure to such events through the media can be quite distressing or stressful.

“ Critical incident stress is the stress response that may arise from disasters, crises or critical incidents. ”

This distress is a normal response to abnormal events, and usually resolves itself in a few days or weeks. It may even require some effort to resolve.

However, while mostly the effects of CIS are transitory, for some of us, the effects may become entrenched and disruptive. This can lead to emotional and, sometimes, physical distress. This distress may significantly interfere with day-to-day living.



Common reactions to disasters

It is very common for those affected by critical incidents or disasters to experience some strong reactions, sometimes not even until some time after the critical incident has happened. Although these symptoms can be distressing and uncomfortable, they are part of a normal stress reaction to a stressful event. Everyone is different and there is no standard pattern of response.

Symptoms of stress responses

Here are some common signs of a stress reaction that may be experienced:

- **Shock and denial.** It is normal to experience a sense of shock and denial in response to any kind of disaster.
- **Anxiety and panic.** Symptoms may include nervousness, trembling, dizziness, inability to slow down or relax, pounding heart, trouble concentrating, trouble breathing, difficulty sleeping properly.
- **Feeling angry and/ or bitter** about what happened; at whoever caused the event/ allowed it to happen; at the senselessness of it all.
- **Mood swings**, unpredictable behaviour, irritability, loss of emotional control.
- **Grief and sadness** for the death, injury or loss.
- **Fear** for your own safety and future, and/ or fear for those you care about; of being left alone or having to leave loved ones; of breaking down or losing control; of a similar event happening again.
- **Memories, nightmares and/ or vivid flashbacks** of the event or of other incidents and/ or losses in your life. These may make it difficult to concentrate, sleep and eat. You may also experience physical reactions like rapid heart beat or sweating.
- **Guilt** related to the event; thinking you're responsible in some way; feeling guilty about receiving help; feeling guilty that you have survived.
- **Feeling lonely**, lost, isolated, abandoned.
- **Withdrawal**; wanting to hide and/ or avoid others.



- **Effects on interpersonal relationships.**

Difficult experiences can bring people closer, but sometimes arguments and conflict increase. You may find it difficult to talk about what you have been through. You may not want to burden others with your problems.

- **Physical symptoms** may also happen.

For example, headaches, nausea/ vomiting, chest pain or increased blood pressure may be experienced. These may require medical attention. Pre-existing medical conditions may worsen due to the acute stress. Other physical reactions may include tremors (lips, hands), sweating more than usual, thirst, diarrhoea, rapid heartbeat/ breathlessness, muscle aches, feeling uncoordinated/ dizzy/ weak/ faint, chills, visual difficulties, grinding teeth.

“ It is normal to experience a sense of shock and denial in response to any kind of disaster. ”

- **Sleep disturbances** and nightmares may also be a problem.
- **Cognitive effects** such as disturbed thinking, difficulty concentrating/ making decisions/ calculating/ problem-solving, confusion, feeling disoriented, poor memory.
- **Behavioural effects** such as angry outbursts, drug and alcohol misuse, blaming others, being overly vigilant/ suspicious, increased/ decreased appetite, anti-social behaviour, feeling jumpy/ easily startled, pacing.

- **Reactions can change with time**, and some of these responses may begin later. For example, some people who seem to be coping well at first may become depressed later. Signs of depression may include loss of appetite, tiredness, restlessness, hopelessness, worthlessness and/ or withdrawal.

How long will recovery take?

Everyone is different. Reactions may last days, weeks or months, even occasionally longer.

With understanding and support, stress reactions usually pass quickly. However, in some instances, the reactions experienced are so powerful that professional counselling may be required. This does not suggest that a person is weak or crazy, but simply that the experience was too overwhelming to manage without help.

Stress reactions in children

Children depend on routine to provide security. When a child's routine is broken by emergencies, crises, or disasters, they may also have an acute stress reaction. However, as with adults, with loving attention, stress reactions in children usually resolve themselves within a few days or weeks.

Some common reactions that children and teenagers may demonstrate include:

- Less responsive to parents than usual
- Fearful, worried
- Nightmares and, or disturbed sleep
- More clingy than usual towards parents/ caregivers
- Distancing self from parents/ caregivers
- Regressive behaviour (e.g. bedwetting, loss of speech and/ or motor skills)
- Continually talking about the event and "playing"/ re-enacting it
- Never talking/ refusing to talk of the event
- Angry outbursts, tantrums, aggression
- Complaints about bodily aches and pains
- Poor concentration at school, decreased performance.

If a child continues to demonstrate changes in behaviour, it may be necessary to seek professional help (see final section of this booklet).



TALKING, OR COUNSELLING MAY ASSIST IN RECOVERY



Managing acute stress

We need to remember that everyone has their own way of responding to overwhelming experiences. Some people will seem to recover quickly and relatively easily, while others remain overwhelmed for longer periods of time.

This section offers a number of tips to help you recover and/or regain a sense of control following a crisis or disaster.

Tips for coping immediately after a disaster/crisis

Remember that everyone who witnesses a disaster may be affected by it. You may not be alone in this. Here are some tips for those affected in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.

Talking may bring healing

Talking about your experiences after the event may help the healing process begin mentally and emotionally.

Join rituals and services

Join in any memorial services, symbolic events or rituals, if that helps you deal with your experience.

Seek and accept support

Ask for support from people who care about you and/ or who will listen to you. Let people know how you're feeling. Allow people to care for you.

“ Some people will seem to recover quickly and relatively easily, while others remain overwhelmed for longer periods of time. ”

Utilise community resources

Take advantage of the support offered by community groups and resources. Find out what's available locally for people who have been affected by disasters and other crises – or ask someone to help you find this out.



General tips for coping

Draw strength from relationships

We need each other. Discuss your fears and concerns with family, friends or colleagues.

Limit exposure to media coverage

Keep abreast of the news, but be careful not to overload yourself. When you start to feel it's too much, give yourself a break. In fact, it may be useful to avoid absorbing any images or information that may make you feel more nervous or anxious (especially before going to bed), such as scary movies. This may allow you time to build up positive feelings and images of the world again.

Keep to a routine

Try to keep up (or try to re-establish) your normal routine of work/ housework and/ or other activities, such as eating meals at regular times. This may help create a sense of order and stability when the chaos of the outside world may seem overwhelming.

Do things you enjoy

Make time to have fun and do the things you like doing, such as getting together with friends, going to the beach or a movie, shopping, attending a sporting event, or pursuing a hobby.

Contributing to the community

Assisting others when we're in need can help take the focus off ourselves. It can help us regain a sense of control and empowerment when we feel powerless and vulnerable as circumstances can seem outside our control. However, we need to be careful of ourselves when managing acute stress as our energy is often low at these times. If you wish to contribute to the community, here are some ways you can try:

- Volunteer to help in whatever way you can
- Donate to a charity or to relief efforts in troubled spots nationally or internationally
- Give blood
- Pray for peace – either as an individual or by joining others. Local churches



almost always offer prayers for national and world issues each week. You are most welcome at any one of **The Salvation Army's** network of churches around Australia or the world. For contact details use the *Locate a Service* facility at www.salvos.org.au or see **The Salvation Army** listing in the White Pages telephone directory.

- Join a community of faith, such as **The Salvation Army**, and become involved in making a positive contribution to your community.

Keep healthy

Keeping healthy may help you manage better.

- Eat nutritious, well-balanced meals
- Get plenty of sleep and rest
- Avoid drugs, alcohol and caffeine, which may only worsen feelings of anxiety
- Get some exercise – exercise and activity can be particularly helpful.

Tips for coping:

- Draw strength from relationships
- Limit exposure to media coverage
- Keep to a routine
- Do things you enjoy
- Contribute to the community
- Keep healthy
- Think positive
- Focus on life affirming activities
- Touch is important
- Draw strength spiritually.

Think positive!

Think positive thoughts about yourself and focus on your ability to cope. Remember you have probably overcome difficulties in the past and try to trust yourself to meet the challenge again. Try to remember what steps you took to deal with your feelings in previous situations.

Focus on life-affirming activities

Spend more time with the people you love. Give your pets some special attention. Do some gardening or buy yourself fresh flowers to brighten your home. Visit a scenic location and reflect on the beauty and wonder of nature.

Touch may be important

Ask someone for a hug.

Draw strength spiritually

A person's faith or spiritual life can be a great source of strength in difficult times. It may also help provide guidance and bring another perspective to the situation.

Be familiar with emergency information

Know appropriate emergency responses for your area – for example, what to do in case of bushfire or cyclone.

Be thankful

It can help to be thankful for any positive thing in our lives. For example family, friends, health and/ or home.

Allow time

It takes time to heal. Allow yourself to grieve for any loss you may have experienced. Be patient with yourself and others, particularly with any emotional ups and downs.

Tips for coping immediately after a disaster/ crisis:

- Talking may bring healing
- Join rituals and services
- Seek and accept support
- Utilise community resources.

More tips for coping:

- Be familiar with emergency information
- Be thankful
- Allow time
- Avoid major decisions
- Know what to expect
- Allow for differences between family members
- Don't forget how to laugh.

Avoid major decisions

Making major life decisions, such as changing jobs, can be stressful and may be best avoided at this time.

Know what to expect

Read a little about what to expect in recovering from a critical incident. This may help you deal with it better.

Allow for differences between people

Everyone has a different way of dealing with crises or disasters. For example, some people may have trouble acknowledging and/ or expressing their feelings, trying instead to “tough it out”, while other

people may need to talk it over. Try to respect a person’s need for privacy and/ or private grief if you are someone who manages differently.

Don’t forget how to laugh

Using humour can help you cope. If it’s useful to you, watch a funny television program or video, read a humorous book or spend time with someone who makes you laugh.

RIGHT & BELOW LEFT
FOCUS ON LIFE
AFFIRMING ACTIVITIES,
& **BELOW RIGHT**
TALKING MAY BRING
HEALING





Helping children, teenagers & others cope

How can we speak to our children, or children in our care, about events like disasters, war and terrorism? Should we try and shelter them or can we talk openly? How can we help children understand tragedy when we ourselves are struggling?

During times of increased fear and uncertainty, children feel anxious too. They see the news and hear people talking, but it's difficult for them to put things in perspective because of their limited life experience.

“ It's important that we encourage children to talk if they want to. ”

As adults, it's important that we encourage children to talk if they want to, listen to them, answer their questions and provide reassurance. We also have a responsibility to try and cope in such a way as to minimise fear and confusion among our children – or to ask others to care for them when we can't. However, if we do this, it's important to maintain quality contact with our children.

Be aware of your behaviour

Realise that your response during or after a crisis may influence your child/ teenager's reaction. Children often take on the emotions and behaviour of the adults around them.

Encourage expression

Acknowledge your child/ teenager's concerns and let them know their feelings are normal. Encourage them to talk about their feelings if they want to.

Younger children may be better able to share their feelings and thoughts through activities or drawings rather than with words. Some older children and teenagers may also find it helpful to draw or write about their thoughts and feelings.



Provide lots of love and care

Spend more time with your children if you are able, or arrange others who love them to spend time with your children. Let them be more dependent than usual. Physical affection in particular can be very comforting.

Emphasise safety information

Be sure to remind your children they are safe, and that you as parents are safe, if this is true. If you are not safe, build safety plans to make yourselves more safe. Try and give your child a sense of perspective if possible. For example, if there's conflict overseas, use a map to show them the crisis is a long way away.

Deal with questions honestly

As children try to understand what has happened, they may repeatedly ask difficult

or unexpected questions. Try to answer their questions simply and directly. Don't falsely minimise obvious danger, as even with younger children you may not be able to protect them completely from coverage of an event. Admit you don't know all the answers.

Limit exposure

Limit children's exposure to media coverage and adult conversations about an event. If you do allow children to watch media coverage, try to keep it to a minimum and watch with your child/ children. Talk about it afterwards to make sure they haven't misunderstood what they've seen/ read/ heard. Try and be aware of what/ how events are discussed/ dealt with by other children or teachers/ adults at school, pre-school, playgroup, day-care, etc.



Be patient with difficult behaviour

Quickly and firmly address aggressive or destructive behaviour, but be patient with your child generally. Be firm on the really important standards, but flexible on less important issues such as chores.

Encourage positive action

Involve children/ teenagers in activities that help them realise they can make a positive difference. For example, they may wish to help raise money towards relief efforts or send cards to people affected by a disaster.

Monitor progress

Keep in contact with teachers, carers and others who are involved with your children. Seek feedback about how they are coping at school or child care. If they have ongoing difficulties coping you may need to seek professional help (see pages 15-16).



Maintain normal routines

It's really important to make children feel safe by placing them in a familiar environment with people they feel close to where possible. Try to avoid introducing experiences that are new and challenging. Maintain family routines as much as possible. Children find comfort and a sense of security in consistency and familiarity.

Try to make sure your child/ teenager is receiving a nutritious diet and enough rest. Try to avoid junk food, which can exacerbate negative behaviour.

Tips for children:

- Be aware of your behaviour
- Encourage expression
- Provide lots of love and care
- Emphasise safety information
- Deal with questions honestly
- Limit exposure
- Be patient with difficult behaviour
- Encourage positive action
- Monitor progress
- Maintain normal routines.



When to seek professional help

As described in the earlier sections of this booklet, people who have been exposed to a crisis or disaster often experience stress reactions related to the incident.

In most cases these are normal reactions to an abnormal situation, and they will resolve themselves.

However, it is possible to experience persistent serious problems that interfere with your everyday life. If you are experiencing some of the following signs, you may wish to consider seeking professional assistance:

- You feel you cannot handle the intensity of any feelings or reactions you may be experiencing right now
- Your normal ways of coping are not working for you
- You do not seem to be getting back to "normal" as soon as you would expect
- You need to talk to someone and feel there is no-one you can talk to about how you are feeling
- Your work performance or home life and interpersonal relationships are suffering
- You are unable to stop thinking about the disaster/ crisis; you are avoiding people, places, conversations that remind you of the event; or you are having continued difficulty sleeping; especially seek help if you are having thoughts of death or suicide

- New incidents trigger memories and feelings from previous incidents that have not been dealt with.

When to seek professional help for your children

With children, continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the disaster/ crisis, continued and extreme withdrawal, and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the possibility of needing professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional can help children and their parents understand and deal with thoughts, feelings and behaviours that result from crises and disasters.



Where to seek assistance



RIGHT
SALVO
CARE
LINE

The Salvation Army Counselling Service

The Salvation Army Counselling Service is open to everyone and offers professional counsel for personal issues including managing reactions to disasters, and working with stress and anxiety. To make an appointment, call the centre nearest you (see back cover for locations).

Salvo Care Line

If you simply wish to talk or seek initial referral advice, the Salvo Care Line telephone counselling service is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Sydney Metro ☎ **9331 6000**
Brisbane Metro ☎ **3831 9016**
Outside Sydney
or Brisbane ☎ **1300 36 36 22**

Resources from God's Word, the Bible

Some verses you may find helpful:

- 1 Peter 5:7
- Ecclesiastes 3
- Ecclesiastes 3:11
- Ephesians 4:2
- Ephesians 4:32
- Galatians 6:2
- Isaiah 26:3
- Isaiah 41:10
- John 13:34
- John 14:27
- John 16:33
- Matthew 6:33-34
- Philippians 4:6-7
- Psalm 19:1
- Psalm 23
- Psalm 28:7
- Psalm 46:1-3,10
- Psalm 89:1-2
- Psalm 91:1-4
- Psalm 126:5
- Romans 8:39
- Romans 12:18
- Romans 12:21

Local community resources

You may wish to contact your local faith community, general practitioner or mental health professional to find out about other resources that may be available.



Acknowledgements

- **American Psychological Association:**
<http://helping.apa.org>
www.apa.org
- **Anderson R 2002**, NSW Rural Fire Service Chaplaincy and Family Support Program Procedures – Training – Resource Manual, The Salvation Army Australia Eastern Territory.
- **David Baldwin’s Trauma Pages:**
www.trauma-pages.com
- **Los Angeles County Dept of Mental Health**
- **National Mental Health Association (USA):**
www.nmha.org/reassurance/anniversary/index.cfm
- **Red Cross International**
- **The Federal Emergency Management Agency, USA (FEMA).**
- **The Salvation Army Counselling Service**
- **University of Oklahoma**

Thank you to The Salvation Army personnel who have contributed to this booklet.

Disclaimer

THE INFORMATION IN THIS BOOKLET HAS BEEN COMPILED FROM SOURCES BELIEVED TO BE RELIABLE. THIS INFORMATION IS NOT INTENDED TO TAKE THE PLACE OF PROFESSIONAL ADVICE. IT IS ADVISABLE THAT YOU SEEK PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLING IF YOU CONSIDER IT NECESSARY OR APPROPRIATE.



It is advisable that you seek professional counselling if you consider it necessary or appropriate



Counselling Services

ACT 

North Lyneham
(02) 6248 5504

Tuggeranong
(02) 6248 5504

NSW 

Rhodes
(02) 9743 2831

Penrith
(02) 4731 1554

Campbelltown
(02) 4731 1554

QLD 

Upper Mount Gravatt
(07) 3349 5046

North Brisbane
(07) 3349 5046

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...regarding The Salvation Army & its services, visit our website



www.salvos.org.au

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...contact the Information & Research Unit on  (02) 9266 9814, or
salvofacts@ae.salvationarmy.org