

Helping friends and co-workers after a disaster

If you are concerned about a loved one or co-worker who has been affected by a natural disaster or an accident, there are some things you can do to help them cope.



When friends and co-workers experience disaster

When someone you know has been affected by a natural disaster or tragedy such as a flood, earthquake, hurricane or fire, it may be very difficult to know what to do or what to expect. Read the following guidelines about individuals coping with disaster from the Centre for Mental Health Services.

- No one who sees a disaster is untouched by it.
- It is normal to feel anxious.
- Profound sadness, grief and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Acknowledging feelings helps a person recover.
- Focusing on strengths and abilities will help an individual heal.
- Accepting help from community programmes and resources is healthy.
- Each person has different needs and different ways of coping.



Talking with friends and co-workers

In addition to providing shelter and physical help for your friends and co-workers, it is important that you are available to listen and support. By sharing feelings and encouraging discussion, you are helping your friend understand their feelings, learn to express them and find ways to cope.

Because it may be difficult for individuals to think about everything that needs to be done at this time, check in with your friend or co-worker regularly and offer to help. Give concrete examples of what you can do. Here are just a few examples:

- Provide a meal on a specific day.
- Replace lost or destroyed items.
- Clean the house.
- Help complete paperwork for insurance forms or make phone calls.
- Shelter pets until the house is in order or until there is a more stable environment.
- Babysit the kids for an afternoon.

Individuals who are coping with severe stress respond better to direct offers of help. When a co-worker returns to work, talk with your manager about how you may be able to help adjust the workload and ease back into the schedule. It may take some time for them to return to their normal routine, especially if they are still sorting through relocation challenges or insurance claims.

Talk to your manager about other ways that your workplace can provide support and assistance. You may offer to help make phone calls or complete forms during your breaks.



When to seek help

Sometimes, the trauma of the disaster may be more than a person can handle alone. According to the Center for Mental Health Services, the behaviours listed below are signs that the individual needs additional assistance coping with the disaster:

- Difficulty communicating thoughts
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty maintaining balance
- Easily frustrated
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol
- Limited attention span
- Poor work performance
- Headaches/stomach problems
- Tunnel vision/muffled hearing
- Colds or flu-like symptoms
- Disorientation or confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Reluctance to leave home
- Depression, sadness
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Mood swings
- Crying easily
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt
- Fear of crowds, strangers or being alone

When talking with your friend who exhibits severe signs of stress, consider broaching the subject with the following suggestions from the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine:

- Ask to speak to the person privately.
- Ask, 'Are you having some difficulties? Do you want to talk?'

Encourage your friend to deal with the stress in healthy ways. Share with your friend these suggestions about easing stress from the Center for Mental Health Services. Suggest that your friend:

- Talk about their feelings, such as anger and sorrow even though it may be difficult.
- Not hold themselves responsible for events out of their control.
- Promote physical and emotional health by staying active in daily life patterns and making necessary adjustments.
- Maintain normal routines as much as possible.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Participate in memorials, rituals and use symbols as a way to express feelings.
- Use existing support groups of family, friends and church.
- Limit exposure to images of the disaster.
- Take one task at a time.
- Ask for help when needed.

You should not hesitate to contact a professional or family member if you believe that the individual needs immediate help or attention.

Conclusion

Experiencing a disaster can bring up a mixture of feelings and emotions. If a friend or co-worker has been directly affected, you can support them by listening to their fears and anxieties and helping with everyday tasks that might seem overwhelming. While all individuals cope with loss and tragedy differently, watch for signs that this person may need more assistance.



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.



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