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Michigan State University
Cooperative Extension Service
Jaime E. Dugan, Associate Program Leader, Family and Consumer Sciences
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Family and Youth Security Series

Caring for Yourself as a Parent or Caregiver in Times of Disaster

*Jaime E. Dugan, Associate Program Leader, Family and Consumer Sciences,
Michigan State University Extension*

Any disaster or traumatic event can cause stress or upset in a parent's or caregiver's life. In today's world, people have witnessed disaster in violence, war, terrorism and natural disasters. Every person reacts differently and can be directly or indirectly affected by disastrous events. Any response, particularly emotional, can develop immediately or may surface months after the disaster. In other words, you may have initial responses to disaster or you may develop reactions later, which are longer term. It is crucial to recognize how you are feeling during and after the event.

As a parent or caregiver, you may feel an incredible amount of responsibility to keep your child safe. Therefore, it is important that you feel safe, secure and calm. An important factor in developing children's coping skills is how well their parents or caregivers manage their own feelings. Children are incredibly perceptive and sensitive, and they receive your mood or reaction, even if you are not speaking about it. Parents can reduce stress in their children only if they can effectively manage their own stress. Children who have been raised by parents who manage stress effectively (even in times of disaster) have the greatest opportunity to grow up healthy, happy and well-equipped to handle their own stress. As a parent or caregiver, it is extremely important that you recognize and understand how you are feeling so that you can effectively cope (and in turn help your children cope) with what is going on around you.



Possible Responses to Disaster

Physical Side Effects

You may initially experience any of the following: headaches, chest pains, rapid breathing, fatigue, sweats or chills, muscular pains, stomach problems, tremors (such as being fidgety or shaky limbs), high blood pressure, cramps or racing heart.

Shock and Disbelief

You may feel surprised or taken off guard by the arising situation. You may have difficulty processing all of the new events and may not be able to put into words how you are feeling.

Guilt

A person can feel and express guilt concerning the disaster in a variety of ways. Some parents feel guilty that the disaster did not directly affect them and are empathetic to those it did. Some parents feel guilty and helpless because they feel as if there was something they could have done to prevent or improve the situation.

Sadness, Depression, Irritability, Anxiety, Disorientation, Anger or Fear

You may feel one or more of the above, because of not being able to control what has happened and not knowing what may come next. You may be having continuous thoughts about the event. You also may be struggling with understanding the finality of the situation, the loss of predictability and how little control you have over it. You may become fearful or scared, because you've lost your sense of safety and feel anxious about the future. The result can lead you to feel highly vulnerable and powerless. You may find that you are irritable, have emotional outbursts and are tearful as a result of the stress of the event.

Denial, Apathy, Avoidance or Emotional Numbing

If you experience any of the above, you may be trying to avoid recognizing (or are withdrawing from) the devastation of the situation. You may even feel an incredible loneliness from believing that no one else could ever understand what you are going through. You may also try to respond as if the event never happened. People who experience this are typically trying to shield themselves from the impact of the situation.

Changes in Sleep Patterns

You may notice that you are having nightmares about the event or wake in the middle of the night with thoughts of the disaster. You may have trouble sleeping (and relaxing), which can cause more extreme reactions to the event



because your body is unable to rest. Another change in your sleep pattern may be excessive sleeping or sleeping to escape, which is often linked to depression.

Changes in Eating Habits

You may find that you are eating excessively as a way to comfort yourself, or you may ignore your hunger because you are highly focused on the event. You may also find that you have a loss of appetite or stomach problems due to the stress you are experiencing.

Indecisiveness and Overall Changes in Quality of Life

You may have difficulty making decisions because you are extremely concentrated on the event. You may also find that you are experiencing a lack of energy, interest in other things or motivation to involve yourself in your normal activities. You may feel that your quality of life has decreased.

Reliving the Disaster or Responding to Triggers

Some people are triggered by sights, sounds or smells (or even anniversary dates of the event) that remind them of the incident. This makes the person recall the event and experience emotions similar to their initial response. Typically, these flashbacks happen within the first few months and will decrease as time passes. In other cases, a person may experience a disaster that is similar to an experience earlier in life. The person not only remembers the first incident but has to deal with both.

Seek Help

Some people who experience disaster cling to others for help because they are unsure of how to process the situation. Others may desperately try to find help or information for themselves or their family to make sure they are taken care of. Some feel the need to give as much help as they can to others (especially other victims) affected by the disaster.

Drug, Alcohol or Tobacco Use

When faced with a disastrous event, some people turn to excessive use of alcohol, drugs or tobacco to help relieve pressure and stress.

Unfortunately, this only compounds stress and can distort the reality of the situation.

Most of the possible reactions described above will decrease as time passes. It is important to understand that everyone reacts differently, and we need to remain nonjudgmental of others as they work through their feelings in their own ways. In a time of disaster, it is important as a caregiver or parent to tune in to yourself and your reactions to best respond to your needs and your family's. Once you are able to recognize and label your reactions, you will have the opportunity to address them appropriately.



Help Yourself

Stay busy and search for information about assistance for yourself and others affected by the disaster. Recognize your feelings and don't label them negatively or criticize yourself for reacting. Remind yourself that you are having normal reactions. Try to identify how you are responding and how it is affecting your life. If exercise was part of your typical routine, try to continue exercising to relieve stress. Take time to do the things that make you feel good. Continue to make daily

decisions to exercise control over your life.

Within the first couple of days, try to exercise heavily and then have periods of relaxation. It will help to lessen some of the stress-related physical responses you will experience. Learn new techniques to relax and use them often. Try writing in a journal (keep it by your bedside so that if you are having trouble sleeping, you can write), listening to soothing music or taking a few minutes to concentrate on deep breathing. Take good care of yourself — eat healthy (keep fatty foods, sugar and caffeine amounts low), drink lots of water, try to rest at night and stay active during the day. Try to limit or eliminate any alcohol or tobacco use.

Help Others

Recognize that others around you will be experiencing their own range of emotions in response to the event. Respect how they are feeling and help them to share their feelings (if they do not want to share, respect that as well). Be patient with others — they may react differently than you do. They may be irritable, short-tempered or sad. Be proactive and do something positive such as volunteering in the community or donating items to help others in need.

Make Time for Your Family

Spend time with your children and find happiness in the little everyday things they do. Plan family outings, take trips and play. Talk with your children and encourage

What You Can Do

Identify and Use Your Support Systems

Express your feelings by talking with family, friends and loved ones. This will help you work through what happened and connect with others who are experiencing similar feelings. Be sure to schedule time with those you care about. Stay active and consider participating in community events that may be happening as a result of the disaster. It is important not to isolate yourself, but it is OK to take some time by yourself to reflect on the situation and meet your needs. Everyone reacts to disasters differently and has different ways of processing the events.

Maintain and/or Develop a Routine

Try to maintain normalcy in your daily routine and life. If that's not possible, return to your routine as soon as you are ready. Return to work and your family routines as soon as possible, and set aside structured family time to talk about the disaster.

them to talk with you about the recent events. It is also important to recognize that it's OK to schedule time away from your children to take care of your needs.

Monitor Your Exposure to Media

If you find that you are having trouble focusing or difficulty sleeping because of continuous reoccurring visions or images, you may need to limit watching coverage of the disaster. Try reading newspaper or magazine articles or listening to the radio. Be sure to limit the time you (and your children) spend involved in all of the media coverage — too much may make you anxious. It is OK to take a break from the coverage.

Seek additional help and support

If you are experiencing extreme emotions that seem to interfere with your day-to-day functioning or are having trouble with your daily routines, consider talking to a mental health professional. Being unable to function properly on a daily basis after a disaster is one symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. Typically, if any extreme symptoms persist longer than 6 weeks, it may be time to seek advice from a doctor or other professional. Some people consult with mental health professionals to talk about and reflect on their experiences and effectively work through the event. Any form of additional support will be helpful in the healing process.

All people are affected by disasters. It is imperative to remember that we all process our emotions and respond differently. Emotional reactions are common reactions by normal people to unexpected events. Typically, emotional reactions decrease with time. As parents and caregivers, it is extremely important to take care of ourselves so that we can be effective models for our children. Talk with your children about the event, your feelings and the media. Our children have the greatest chance of effectively managing stress if we provide a basis for the process itself.



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