

Caring for Yourself in Times of Crisis

How can you be prepared? Prepared for the emotional devastation in response to the tragedies occurring in our world today? Hopefully they have not become so common that we simply say, “Oh, another one,” - another shooting, natural disaster, child abduction, more suffering, greater destruction, and more astonishment in these much too-frequent realities. Secondary trauma is the negative and sometimes debilitating emotional response we experience when affected by the losses of others.

From witnessing the horrors of devastated and destroyed cities and families from the earthquake in Haiti or the chaos first hand or via the media, this exposure can cause emotional, physically and spiritual exhaustion and impairment.

While one can never be fully prepared for any crisis – or exposure to crisis – we can make best use of our choices that lead us to growth and healing. There are decisions and actions we can take to minimize the impact and maximize the recovery of secondary trauma.

Below are some six important suggestions that can help:

In Times of Crisis-

- ***Understand normal reactions***

It would be difficult to not have horrific headlines and images played in our minds again and again after learning of recent tragedies such as the earthquake in Haiti. It is common to experience a wide range of emotions that are too complex to organize. It is not simple to wrap our minds around reasons for sudden death or perpetrated violence. Therefore feelings of shock and disbelief, as well as fear and sadness swim in our hearts and minds, affect all areas of our lives, and can be drowning to our spirits. These are normal reactions to abnormal situations.

- ***Realize effects of other losses***

There are two major issues that can affect how you cope with any current crisis. The first includes previous experiences with crisis or trauma in your own life. You may find your thoughts consumed with flashbacks and memories of past events that were painful - a family death, or divorce or a national tragedy. And second, any current major stressors. A personal crisis or challenge is now magnified – such as caring for an aging parent, or experiencing financial problem, or your own thoughts of depression, loneliness or grief.

- ***Consider past healing***

Most likely you have survived one or many previous losses or traumas. Consider what helped you most and seek similar solutions or supports. What activities, actions, or involvements led you through healing in past stressful times? Also consider what perhaps did not help and try to not repeat those coping attempts- such as indulging in unhealthy behaviors, or not addressing your feelings at all.

- ***Talk with children & inquire about school safety issues***

If you are a parent, a key concern may be how to address such terrible events with your children. There is an increased level of stress in those who have school-age/college-age children, and for those who work in an educational environment. These are normal reactions to emerge after random acts of violence against innocent student and school faculty. Research has shown that human-made traumatic events are more psychologically distressing to individuals than natural disasters. And while these types of disasters cannot be 100% preventable, educational institutions can put security measures in place to limit the accessibility to the facility. Another imperative issue schools should consider is how prepared and organized they are to respond to event once it has occurred.

Consider the following suggestions:

- Talk with your child's school/university about what safety/security measures are in place to prevent an act of violence.
- Specifically inquire as to what their ***Crisis Plan*** entails, what is the make-up of their ***Crisis Response Team***, and what type of ***Crisis Response*** are they prepared to activate. The Federal Government mandates all schools to establish crisis plans and crisis teams.
- Have they performed tabletop and/or full-scale drills of their Crisis Plan and Response?
- Has their faculty and support staff been trained how to specifically handle a crisis specifically an intruder in the building or a student with a weapon?

Lastly, if your children are at an age where they are exposed to the news, talk to them about the recent events. Allow them to express their fears and feelings about these events. Remember to use their level of development as a guide – do not give too much information to very young children.

- ***Be intentional in self-care***

Take care of yourself! Be patient, but also be deliberate in daily choices that bring health and healing. Spend time with friends and family. Go for a walk. Take a bubble bath or read a good book. These and other activities of self-care can go a long way to balance the trauma of events outside of our control. They bring emotional as well as physical relief and are necessary in preventing further strife and turmoil.

- ***Recognize need for help***

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. If there are ongoing debilitating consequences resulting from any crisis or critical incident, this posttraumatic stress can be dealt with, and you can regain your life again. You may want to talk with a mental health professional to discuss how well you are coping with recent events. Seek help early, before the devastation of secondary trauma causes emotional or physical burnout.

For confidential and professional help in recovering from any current or previous crisis, contact Centerstone at (615) 460- HELP (4357) or visit www.Centerstone.org.