

Where can I find help?

At any time, it is possible to ask for help from a health and social services professional.

It's free and confidential.

- > Municipal disaster services centre
- > Centre de santé et de services sociaux (CSSS) in your locality
- > Info-Santé and Info-Social: 8-1-1

Information is also available on the following websites:

- > Ministère de la Santé et des Services Sociaux
www.msss.gouv.qc.ca
- > Urgence Québec
www.urgencequebec.gouv.qc.ca
- > Info-Trauma
www.info-trauma.org
- > Human stress
www.stresshumain.ca

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AFTER A DISASTER

A disaster is a special and unusual reality, due to its sudden and unpredictable nature and the magnitude of the losses it causes. A disaster can disrupt the everyday lives of the people affected—physically, psychologically, socially, materially, financially and environmentally. Despite the uncertainties and the losses it may cause, such a situation calls on the capacity of individuals, families, communities and society as a whole to adapt and organize, soliciting mutual aid and solidarity from everyone.

This is an information tool for people directly or indirectly affected by a disaster. In addition to presenting the reactions people may have in such circumstances, this quick reference offers means of adapting better to the situation and information on the available resources.

What are the possible reactions to such an event?

Although every individual lives this experience in a unique way, there can be unusual physical, emotional and behavioural reactions.

Physical reactions: Headaches, decrease in appetite, difficulty sleeping, muscle tension, fatigue, stomachaches, palpitation, stress, etc.

Psychoemotional reactions: Anxiety, confusion, difficulty concentrating, powerlessness, despair, guilt, fear of recurrence of the event, sadness, denial, depressive feelings, flashbacks, difficulty making decisions, nightmares, anger, aggression, etc.

Behavioural reactions: Isolation, agitation, irritability and anger, conflicts with the people around you, avoidance of the places where the event occurred, passivity, alcohol, drug or medication abuse, frequent weeping, etc.

Such an event may also lead us to question the meaning of life. Here are some examples:

- > A sense of injustice: “Why me? Why them?”
- > Difficulty understanding what is currently happening.
- > A need to look for meaning in this terrible event.
- > Difficult resuming a life satisfactory to us.
- > Feeling burned out and losing hope for a better future.

Usually, these reactions are short term. For some people, these reactions may be more intense and last longer. They may also occur later. Some situations may also resurface and bring up difficult and unpleasant memories. Reactions may vary according to the person's age and state of health and the impacts suffered due to this event. It is important to remember that these reactions are normal when faced with a situation that is abnormal.

Despite the pain, it is also possible to generate more positive reactions, such as:

- > A closer relationship with the people around you.
- > Modification or reinforcement of your values and beliefs.
- > Creation of bonds with new people who lived through the same situation or a similar situation.
- > Discovery of new strengths (stress tolerance, adaptability, etc.).

Children will react according to their age and will tend to imitate the reactions of the people around them. Also, members of the same family may have different reactions. Our reactions may also be influenced by our beliefs and values, as well as the support on which we can rely.

What can I do about this situation?

Despite the scope of the situation, every person has various strengths and skills to deal with the stress created by this event and may ask for help, as needed. Here are some approaches that may be helpful:

- > Ensure that my family and I are safe.
- > Stay informed on changes in the situation.
- > If applicable, take steps with the authorities in place and the available services.
- > Try to restore a routine concerning meals, sleep and other activities of daily living.
- > Depending on my capacity, exercise regularly.
- > Maintain contact with people with whom I feel comfortable.
- > To avoid isolation, I can talk about my situation and my needs with a person on whom I can rely to help me (my family and friends, a practitioner, etc.).
- > Favour mutual aid and solidarity. While respecting my limits, helping others can contribute to my well-being and to that of others.
- > Avoid making major decisions when I am upset.
- > Maintain a constructive interior dialogue, telling myself that the situation will improve and that things will get better.
- > Avoid consuming alcohol or drugs to reduce stress. Overconsumption of these products can create anxious or depressive reactions.
- > Pay attention to signs of fatigue or burnout and consult a professional, as needed.
- > Avoid overexposure to media reports that may cause you to relive the event constantly.
- > Identify means or strategies already used in the past to get through a difficult period.
- > Whenever possible, allow myself little pleasures and keep some time for myself.

Post-traumatic reactions

Some survivors of an event, who may have witnessed traumatic scenes, may have to bear more painful post-traumatic reactions.

Reactions that give the impression of constantly reliving the event:

- > Recurring and invasive memories of the event (images, thoughts, perceptions).
- > Recurring nightmares.
- > A strong impression that the event will happen again.
- > Flashbacks (sudden mental images of what happened).
- > A feeling of distress and intense and uncontrollable reactions when seeing images or hearing about the event.

Avoidance reactions:

- > Efforts to avoid anything that may recall the event (thoughts, feelings, activities, conversations, images, etc.).
- > An inability to remember certain important aspects of the event.
- > A reduction of interest in activities the person liked before the event.
- > Difficult expressing emotions.
- > Isolation from close relations.
- > A feeling that no future is possible.

Physical reactions and hypervigilance reactions:

- > Persistent fatigue.
- > Nausea, stomach pains.
- > Muscle pains, pressure in the chest, tight throat.
- > Headaches, dizziness.
- > Jumpiness.
- > Palpitations, tremors, sweating.

The intensity of these reactions may lead the person to burn out gradually and feel increasingly depressed. If these reactions persist more than four weeks, it is important to consult a professional to evaluate your situation properly and receive the appropriate services.

When is it necessary to ask for help?

Although most people will adapt to the situation gradually, here are some reference points indicating that it may be necessary to ask for help from a health and social services professional:

- > When your reactions remain intense and prevent you from meeting your basic needs (food, sleep, etc.).
- > In case of serious difficulties functioning normally in your everyday, family, professional and other activities.
- > When you can no longer recover, and you feel overwhelmed and unable to return to a normal routine.
- > When you or your close relations are worried about your emotional reactions (suicidal ideas, specific behaviours, consumption of alcohol, drugs or medication).

Don't hesitate to ask for help and, above all, don't lose hope.