



A DISASTER HAS OCCURRED

A disaster is an unusual event because of its sudden, unforeseeable nature and the extent of the losses stemming from it. It can disrupt the daily lives of the individuals affected from a physical, psychological, social, material, financial, and environmental standpoint. Despite the uncertainty and losses that such a situation can engender, it calls on the ability to adapt and organize of individuals, families, the community, and society, and for mutual aid and solidarity.

This information sheet is intended for individuals who are directly or indirectly affected by a disaster. In addition to presenting the reactions that such circumstances can arouse, it proposes the means of better adapting to the situation and information on the resources available.

What reactions are possible following a disaster?

While each individual experiences a disaster in a unique way, it is possible to experience unusual reactions from a physical, emotional, and behavioural standpoint.

PHYSICAL REACTIONS: Headaches, loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, muscular tension, fatigue, stomach aches, palpitations, and stress.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL REACTIONS: Anxiety, confusion, difficulty concentrating, powerlessness, despair, guilt, the fear of the event's recurrence, sadness, negation, depressive feelings, flashbacks, difficulty making decisions, nightmares, anger, and aggressiveness.

BEHAVIOURAL REACTIONS: Isolation, agitation, irritability and anger, conflicts with those in proximity, avoidance of the site where the event occurred, passivity, increased consumption of alcohol, drugs or medications, and frequent weeping.

Moreover, such an event can lead us to call into question the meaning of life. Here are some examples:

- > a feeling of injustice: "Why me? Why them?";
- > difficulty understanding what is happening now;
- > a need to seek the meaning of this terrible event;
- > difficulty resuming a life that you deem satisfactory;
- > feeling exhausted and losing hope of a better future.

Such reactions are usually short-lived, although they may be more intense and last longer for some people. They can also manifest themselves later. Certain situations can also resurface and rekindle difficult, unpleasant memories. Reactions can vary depending on the person's age, state of health, and the event's impact. **It should be noted that the reactions are normal** when facing a situation that is not normal.

Despite the resulting grief, it is also possible to achieve more positive reactions such as:

- drawing closer to the people around you;
- a change in or the strengthening of values of sharing and kindness;
- the establishment of bonds with people who have experienced the same situation or a similar one;
- the discovery of new strengths such as a tolerance for stress and the ability to adapt.

Children react according to their age and will, above all, tend to imitate the reactions of the people around them. What is more, the members of the same family can react differently. Our reactions can also be influenced by our beliefs and values but also by the support on which we can rely.

How can you respond to this situation?

Despite the magnitude of the situation, individuals possess strengths and skills to contend with the stress that the event engenders and can seek help if need be. Here are some helpful suggestions:

- ensure that you and the members of your family are safe;
- keep abreast of recent developments;
- if the need arises, contact local authorities and the services available;
- attempt to resume a routine regarding meals, sleep, and the other activities of daily living;
- exercise regularly according to your capacities;
- maintain contact with people whose company you enjoy;
- to avoid isolation, you can discuss your situation and needs with someone on whom you can rely, such as your family circle or an intervener, to help you;
- rely on mutual aid and solidarity. Bearing in mind your limits, helping other people can contribute to your wellness and that of other people;
- avoid making significant decisions when you are deeply distressed;
- maintain a constructive inner dialogue by telling yourself that the situation will improve and things will get better;
- avoid consuming alcohol or drugs to reduce stress. Overconsumption of these products can engender anxiety or depressive reactions;
- monitor signs of fatigue or exhaustion and consult a professional if need be;
- avoid excessive exposure to media reporting that can constantly make you relive the event;
- pinpoint means or strategies already used in the past to get through a difficult period;
- whenever possible, set aside time for happy moments and save time for yourself.



Post-traumatic reactions

Some disaster survivors who have witnessed traumatic scenes may experience post-traumatic reactions that are more painful to bear.

Reactions where the individual has the impression of constantly reliving the event:

- › endless, pervasive recollections of the event such as images, thoughts, and perceptions;
- › endless nightmares;
- › a strong impression that the event will recur;
- › flashbacks (sudden mental images of what happened);
- › a feeling of distress and intense, uncontrollable reactions that seeing images of the event or hearing people talk about it arouse.

Avoidance reactions:

- › efforts to avoid everything such as thoughts, feelings, activities, conversations, and TV pictures that remind you of the event;
- › an inability to recall certain significant aspects of the event;
- › reduced interest in activities that you enjoyed prior to the event;
- › difficulty expressing your emotions;
- › isolation from your loved ones;
- › the feeling that no future is possible.

Physical reactions and hypervigilance:

- › persistent fatigue;
- › nausea and abdominal pain;
- › muscular pain, pressure in the chest, and a lump in the throat;
- › headaches and vertigo;
- › startle responses;
- › palpitations, trembling, and sweating.

The intensity of such reactions can lead to gradual exhaustion and growing depression. If the reactions persist, it is important to consult a professional to properly assess the situation and to receive the appropriate services.

When is it necessary to ask for help?

While most people will adapt gradually to the situation, here are some indications that it may be necessary to seek help from a health and social services professional when:

- › your reactions remain intense and prevent you from satisfying basic needs such as diet and sleep;
- › you experience serious difficulty performing normally your day-to-day, family, and professional activities;
- › you can no longer recuperate, feel overwhelmed and unable to resume your normal routine;
- › you or your loved ones are anxious about your emotional reactions such as suicidal thoughts, specific behaviour, and the consumption of alcohol, drugs or medications.

Do not hesitate to request assistance, and, above all, do not lose hope.

Where can you get help?

You can always request help from a health and social services professional.

- › Disaster Services Center of the municipality
- › Info-Social 811
- › Family medicine group (FMG)

Information is also available at the following links:

- › Getting better following a disaster
www.quebec.ca/en/public-safety-emergencies/emergency-situations-disasters-and-natural-hazards/getting-better-following-disaster
- › Centre for studies on human stress
<https://humanstress.ca/>
- › Urgence Québec
www.quebec.ca/en/public-safety-emergencies