

Understanding Disaster

Disasters or crises are overwhelming experiences.

People often feel helpless and hopeless

Usually there is:

- bereavement or loss (of people, belongings or place)
- disruption
- sometimes devastation

Possible Effects

Immediate response – hours/days after the experience

- apathy / fatigue / exhaustion
- edginess or tension
- sleep disturbance (insomnia or nightmares)
- hyper vigilance
- mood swings
- impaired concentration / memory / decision making
- a sense of a lack of control

Later – days/weeks after the experience

Normal life may have resumed but people may be experiencing:

- grief
- helplessness
- anger / irritability
- resentment
- flashbacks
- conflict in relationships

This may be directed at:

- helpers
- rescuers
- authorities
- friends or family
- workmates

Delayed – weeks/months after the experience

People may be continuing to experience:

- irritability
- excessive fearfulness
- fatigue
- low spirits / loss of pleasure
- anxiety / phobias
- difficulty eating
- difficulty sleeping

Remember...

- accept people's rights to their own feelings
- let people know that you may be able to understand how they feel
- understand their capabilities and limitations
- accept your own limitations

What to Do

- be warmly interested; kind, non judgemental, not over-sympathetic
- a gesture, a few words may be enough

Be aware of your own exhaustion, fear, irritability

How to Help

- very few will panic, but this may spread, so cope with panicky people in the first instance
- get to know your neighbours prior to a disaster happening
- anxiety about family and friends will be a major concern
- provide clear, simple instructions
- provide basic assistance, e.g. food and drinks
- listening helps people come to terms with their loss
- encourage purposeful activity
- encourage a return to regular routines

For further assistance contact:

- Citizens Advice Bureau
0800 FOR CAB (0800 367 222)
- Mental Health Education and Resource Centre
0800 424 399
- Mental Health Foundation
03 366 6936

Also see the Personal Help Services section in the front of the White Pages.

Pamphlets Available in This Series

Understanding...

Anger
Bereavement
Conflict
Decision Making
Loneliness and Friendship
Self-Esteem

Canterbury

District Health Board

Te Poari Hauora o Waitaha

Community Health Information Centre
Community & Public Health
(A Division of the Canterbury District Health Board)

310 Manchester Street
18 Woollcombe Street, Timaru
Elizabeth Street, Ashburton
3 Tarapuhi Street, Greymouth

www.cph.co.nz

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