

BETTER TOGETHER

Tip 6: Emotional Impact of an Earthquake

When we think of an earthquake, we naturally focus on the physical damage and destruction, but quakes take an emotional and psychological toll too. In addition to the harm to those we love and care about, we have to deal with the shock, dislocation and confusion that follow. Understanding the impact a quake has on our emotional well-being can help us recognize stress and problematic behavior in us and those around us. Knowing and discussing them before disaster strikes can equip us with the tools to successfully overcome the inevitable problems that will arise.

The impact of disaster compounded by the adversities faced in the aftermath, “reshuffles the deck” of coping with the new reality. While most people exposed to disaster rebound quickly from transient stressful events, others suffer from PTSD, major depression and anxiety disorders. Those who lose loved ones in a natural disaster are likely to grapple with complicated grief.

Recent work is leading to a new form of care known as psychological first aid. Amazingly, there are [documents and an app](#) for that. It can provide practical information to help you understand what to expect and how to help those around you. Some of the most affirmative guidance to emerge is that resilience, positive adaptation in the face of disaster’s adversity, is the most common and expectable outcome. Some survivors even emerge from the disaster experience stronger and more vital psychologically, a recently-recognized phenomenon known as post-traumatic growth.

In addition, the [Red Cross](#) has some concrete steps that you can take to help you cope after a disaster.

- **Take care of your safety.** Find a safe place to stay and make sure your physical health needs and those of your family are addressed. Seek medical attention if necessary.
- **Limit your exposure to the sights and sounds of disaster**, especially on television, the radio and in the newspapers.
- **Eat healthy.** During times of stress, it is important that you maintain a balanced diet and drink plenty of water.
- **Get some rest.** With so much to do, it may be difficult to have enough time to rest or get adequate sleep. Giving your body and mind a break can boost your ability to cope with the stress you may be experiencing.
- **Stay connected with family and friends.** Giving and getting support is one of the most important things you can do. Try to do something as a family that you have all enjoyed in the past.
- **Be patient with yourself** and with those around you. Recognize that everyone is stressed and may need some time to put their feelings and thoughts in order. That includes you!
- **Set priorities.** Tackle tasks in small steps.
- **Gather information** about assistance and resources that will help you and your family members meet your disaster-related needs.
- **Stay positive.** Remind yourself of how you’ve successfully gotten through difficult times in the past. Reach out when you need support, and help others when they need it.

Thanks to James M Shultz, Yuval Neria, Andrea Allen and Zelde Espinel for some of the information in this tip. Psychological Impacts of Natural Disasters (2013).