



## HEADINGTON INSTITUTE

*Care for Caregivers Worldwide*

# HOW TO HELP FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES, AND YOURSELF RECOVER FROM A NATURAL DISASTER

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### **What to Expect?**

After a natural disaster like a hurricane, earthquake, or tornado, many people experience a wide variety of positive and negative reactions.

Some of the positive reactions that you may notice include:

- Determination and resolve
- Courage and faith
- Feeling very connected to family, friends, and community
- Feeling involved, challenged and engaged in helping others

Many people also experience negative responses, such as:

- Shock and denial
- Confusion, feeling disoriented or having difficulty concentrating
- Guilt and shame
- Distressing images of the tornado while awake or dreaming
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Being very irritable, not being able to stop crying, or feeling other very extreme emotions
- Feeling “numb”—not feeling anything at all
- Worry or sadness
- Sleep or appetite problems

All of these reactions are very common and are reported by people all over the world after disasters. There may be nothing wrong if you or someone you know is experiencing these reactions. You may notice other changes in your body, emotions, thoughts, and relationships. Every person has their own reaction and pace of recovery and healing after a disaster. You may have some good days and bad days. All of these responses are very common and, for most people, will decrease over time.

## **What Helps?**

There are several things you can do to promote recovery:

- Try to get sufficient rest and nutrition
- Talk to others for support or spend time together
- Focus on something practical you can do right now to manage the situation better
- Try to maintain a routine and resume normal activities
- Find ways to relax yourself—like deep breathing, saying calming words or phrases to yourself, listening to or singing calming music
- Take breaks from work
- Pray, go to church or do other spiritual practices that are important to you
- Reminisce about a loved one who may have died
- Write privately about your thoughts, feelings, and experiences

## **What Doesn't Help?**

When possible, avoid the following:

- Using alcohol or drugs to cope
- Working too much without a break
- Extreme withdrawal from family or friends
- Resorting to violence or conflict
- Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking about the event or death of a loved one
- Doing risky things (driving recklessly, substance abuse, not taking adequate precautions)
- Not taking care of yourself

## **How Can We Support Each Other?**

There are several ways you can offer support to friends and colleagues during the weeks and months ahead:

- Remember that others may be anxious, distracted, and concerned.
- Make an extra effort to be patient with each other
- Encourage your co-workers to take breaks, drink enough water, take care of themselves, and not work too many days without a rest
- Make the time in team meetings to share information, ask questions or express concerns
- Permit flexible work schedules and varying levels of productivity when possible
- Be on the lookout for courage, resilience, and good work, and acknowledge it when you see it
- Follow the instructions and guidance provided by the local authorities concerned with public safety

## **Special Help for Those in Need**

On occasion, some will experience more severe emotional reactions after a natural disaster, even weeks or months later, with no sign of improvement. Encourage them to talk with a trusted religious leader, counselor, or family physician to explore treatment options. You will want to insist that they see a mental health professional if you note one or more of the following:

- Statements indicating possible suicide or self-harm
- Statements indicating possible harm to someone else
- Inability or refusal to speak
- Frequent weeping
- Substantial loss of weight
- Dramatic increase in looking fatigued and/or falling asleep at work
- Increase in substance use
- Dramatic decrease in competency and productivity at work
- Angry outbursts
- Violent behavior of any kind
- Behavior which is implicitly or explicitly threatening
- Increase in reckless behaviors such as gambling, promiscuity, thrill-seeking
- Pronounced indecisiveness