

Coping with a major personal crisis

If you are facing a personal crisis following a serious accident or emergency this factsheet may be able to help you.

You may experience one or more of these feelings:

- **Fear** - of damage to yourself or others, of being left alone or having to leave loved ones, of 'breaking down' or losing control.
- **Helplessness** - a crisis can show up helplessness, as well as strength.
- **Sadness** - for deaths, injuries and losses of any kind and longing for what has gone.
- **Guilt** - for being better off than others, being alive or having things, regret for not doing things.
- **Shame** - for being helpless, emotional, needing others, not reacting as you would like to.
- **Anger** - at what has happened, whoever caused it or allowed it to happen
 - at the injustice and senselessness of it
 - at the shame and indignity
 - of other people's lack of understanding
 - **why me?**
- **Memories** - of feelings or people in your life who have been injured or have died.
- **Let down** - disappointments which alternate with **hope** for the future and for better times.

Everyone has these feelings and experience has shown that they may be particularly strong if:

- many people died
- death was sudden, violent or occurred in horrifying circumstances
- no body was recovered
- there was great dependence on the person who died
- your relationship with this person was at a difficult stage
- this stress came on top of others.

Nature heals by allowing these feelings to come out. This will not lead to losing control of the mind, but stopping these feelings may lead to nervous and physical problems. Crying gives relief.

Physical and mental sensations

You may feel sensations such as tiredness, sleeplessness, bad dreams, fuzziness of mind, loss of memory and concentration, dizziness, palpitations, shakes, difficulty in breathing, choking, nausea, diarrhoea and muscle tension which may lead to pain such as headaches, neck and back aches, menstrual disorders and a decrease in sexual interest. Sometimes these are due to crisis, even if they develop many months after the event.

Family and social relationships

New friends and group bonds may be made but also, strains on friendships may appear. Good feelings when giving and receiving may be replaced by conflict.

You may feel that too little support or the wrong support is offered, or that you cannot give as much support as is expected.

Ways of coping

The following make the events and the feelings about them easier to cope with:

- **Numbness** – your mind may only allow the misfortune to be felt slowly. At first you may feel numb. The event may seem unreal, like a dream or something that has not really happened. People often wrongly see this as being ‘strong’ or ‘uncaring’.
- **Activity** – to be active, to help and give support to others may give some relief. However, over-activity is detrimental if it diverts attention from the help you need for yourself.
- **Confronting reality** – such as attending funerals, inspecting losses or returning to the scene will help you come to terms with the event. You need to accept the experience to get better.
- **Going over the top** – as you allow the event to enter your mind more, you need to think and talk about it and at night dream about it over and over again.
- **Support** – it is a relief to receive other people’s physical and emotional support. Do not reject it. Sharing with others who have had similar experiences will help. Barriers can break down and closer relationships develop.
- **Privacy** – you will find it necessary to be alone at times or be with just family and friends so you can deal with your feelings.

Suggested action

Here’s a quick guide to the best ways of coping and affecting the healing process.

- Express your emotions.
- Take every opportunity to review the experience yourself and with other people.
- Allow yourself to be part of a group of people who care.
- Take time to sleep, rest, think and be with your friends and family.
- Express your needs clearly and honestly to family, friends and officials.
- Try to keep your life as normal as possible after acute grief.

And some things you should try to avoid...

- Try not to bottle up your feelings. Trying to block your feelings may delay your healing.
- Try not to let embarrassment stop you talking to others.
- Don’t expect memories to go away – the feelings will stay with you for a long time.

You should be aware that accidents are more common after severe stresses. Please drive more careful and be more careful around the home. Alcohol and drug intake may increase, due to extra tensions.

When to seek professional help

If, a few weeks after the crisis, you still feel that life is not getting better and you still cannot cope, you may need professional help. Here are some common symptoms:

- If you feel that you cannot handle intense feelings or bodily sensations, your emotions are not falling into place or you feel chronic tension, confusion, emptiness or exhaustion.
- If you continue to feel numb and empty and don’t have any of the feelings described and you have to keep busy in order not to feel.
- If you continue to have nightmares and sleep badly.
- If you want to share your emotions with someone but you feel there is no one you can turn to, and your personal relationships are suffering, or sexual problems develop.
- If you become accident prone, clumsy, or your work suffers.
- If you smoke or drink too much or take drugs since the event.

Further factsheets can be found online at www.devon.gov.uk/factsheets

A large print version of this factsheet is available on www.devon.gov.uk/largeprint-factsheets but if you would like it in a different format such as Braille or tape, or in a different language, please contact our Customer Service Centre on 0845 155 1015 or email customer@devon.gov.uk.

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