

Supporting Mental Health in a Crisis

A crisis can heighten feelings of fear and uncertainty, triggering intense stress that impacts our thoughts, decisions, and actions. It's important to remember that emotional reactions are normal and can vary widely, from anxiety and shock to anger, numbness, or grief. Today, we will outline some common signs of distress and practical steps we can take to support one another.

Common Signs of Acute Distress

- **Cognitive:** Confusion, inability to concentrate, memory issues.
- **Emotional:** Overwhelming fear, irritability, tearfulness, or emotional detachment.
- **Behavioral:** Agitation, social withdrawal, increased use of alcohol or drugs, or engaging in risky actions.
- **Physical:** Disrupted sleep, changes in appetite, rapid heartbeat, headaches.
- **Social:** Increased arguing, difficulty accepting or asking for help, or clinging to others.

Immediate Steps You Can Take

- **Ensure safety first.** Address immediate physical dangers and call emergency services (like 911) if needed.
- **Provide calm, clear direction.** Use a gentle tone and offer simple, one-step instructions. For example, "Let's sit down here. Try to breathe with me slowly."
- **Offer practical help.** Provide water, a warm blanket, a phone, or a quiet place to sit.
- **Normalize their reactions.** Reassure them with simple, validating statements like, "What you're feeling is a normal reaction to an abnormal event."
- **Limit exposure to triggers.** For those directly affected, encourage a break from continuous news cycles and social media.
- **Help those who are suicidal or self-harming.** Do not leave them alone. If you can safely do so, remove any lethal means. Call or text 988 to reach the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) or contact emergency services immediately.

Coping Skills for Stressful Times

- **Focus on fundamentals.** Your body needs support to handle stress. Prioritize restful sleep, eat balanced meals, and stay hydrated, even if you don't feel like it.
- **Practice grounding techniques.** If you feel overwhelmed, grounding can bring you back to the present. Try the 5-4-3-2-1 method: Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste.
- **Connect with others.** Talk to trusted friends, family, or community members. You don't have to talk about the crisis; sometimes, a simple, normal conversation is the most healing.



- **Take mindful breaks.** Give yourself permission to step away from the stress. Even 5 minutes of deep breathing, listening to music, or spending time in nature can reset your nervous system.
- **Limit media consumption.** Set specific times to check the news rather than consuming it continuously. Stick to reputable sources to avoid misinformation.
- **Get help.** The [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) (SAMHSA) offers comprehensive coping tips and disaster preparedness resources on its website.

Supporting Children and Teens

- **Offer honest, age-appropriate explanations.** Be truthful without providing graphic or unnecessary details that could increase fear.
- **Maintain routines.** A predictable schedule for meals, schoolwork, and bedtime provides a crucial sense of stability and security.
- **Encourage expression.** Let them process their feelings through drawing, play, or simple, open-ended conversations.
- **Monitor for changes.** Watch for shifts in school performance or social habits. If you notice significant withdrawal or a decline in grades, contact a school counselor for additional support.

Supporting Older Adults and People with Disabilities

- **Check on practical needs.** Confirm they have an adequate supply of medications and access to necessary medical care.
- **Communicate clearly.** When needed, use simple, slow speech and be prepared to repeat key information patiently.
- **Engage caregivers.** Involve family or professional caregivers to confirm and address specific mobility, sensory, or communication needs.

Building Community Resilience

- **Create clear communication plans.** Ensure that everyone knows where to find accurate and timely updates during a crisis.
- **Train volunteers in psychological first aid.** Equip community members with basic skills to provide emotional and practical support.
- **Develop safe gathering spaces.** Designate places where people can connect, ask questions, and receive referrals to professional help.
- **Run inclusive drills.** Incorporate mental health and support responses into your community's emergency practice plans.