



Institute for Disaster Mental Health

Disaster in Haiti: Coping as Concerned Neighbors

On January 12, a series of powerful earthquakes struck Haiti in a highly populated area. Even now the full extent of the damage is unknown, but we do know that in addition to the massive deaths and injuries, as many as three million people have been affected and that survivors continue to need food, water, temporary shelter, medical services, and emotional support.

Here in America, we have watched our 24 hour news channels as the disaster and relief efforts unfolded. We have witnessed extraordinary resilience and heroic efforts on the part of the Haitian people and those who have come to their aid. There have been reports of Haitians sharing limited food, and of miraculous rescues. We have seen hope and community cohesion. However, most of what we have been witnessing and reading about has been very distressing and saddening – even shocking and horrifying. Our neighbors in Haiti are experiencing such trauma and grief that it is not easy for us to make sense of these events or to find ways to explain them to our children. We can also experience a profound helplessness as we watch and read about this continuing tragedy. How can we in America cope with these events and feelings? Since most of what we know about what is occurring in Haiti comes to us through media, let's begin there and then examine ways to help ourselves and our children handle our reactions.

Media Exposure

During important news events like disasters, it's natural to turn to the media to stay informed about what's happening. In moderation that can help us feel connected to those who were directly affected, and monitoring the rescue and recovery efforts can reassure us that victims are receiving help. However, in an age of 24-hour-a-day coverage on television and the Internet, it's far too easy to become overexposed to scenes of suffering and devastation which can take a toll on our emotions. That's especially a risk when:

- there are graphic images of injured people and dead bodies, as has been common in coverage of the Haitian earthquake
- the suffering of children, the elderly, and other vulnerable people is shown
- viewers have some pre-existing connection with the impacted area or population
- viewers identify in some way with the victims or survivors (for example, if you have children the same age as those being shown as injured or orphaned)

To avoid being traumatized by what you see in the media, try to:

- limit your overall amount of exposure, checking for updates a few times a day rather than keeping the TV or news website on constantly. This will also help you make sure children aren't accidentally exposed to upsetting stories.
- try to get at least some of your news through a medium that includes few or no graphic images such as radio or newspapers, or simply look away from the screen if it seems a disturbing picture is going to be shown.

Coping When Disasters Occur

Even when we're not directly affected by a particular disaster, empathy for our fellow humans can cause significant distress over their suffering. This shows we are caring human beings and is not a bad thing. However, sometimes we don't cope with that distress in the most productive ways. Research on disasters has found that healthy recovery for disaster survivors is related to regaining feelings of safety and calm, increasing a sense of efficacy and connectedness with others, and maintaining hope. Some of these principles can guide us as we watch from afar. The following are some suggestions for ways you can cope with your reactions to the disaster in Haiti, while helping your family and community as well as the earthquake survivors.

Managing Your Own Reaction

In the face of overwhelming events, being engaged and active can allow us to feel less helpless.

- Try not to dwell on thoughts of survivors' suffering, but to direct your concern towards productive actions.
- Maintain any spiritual or religious activities you usually practice.
- Seek out ways you can help the earthquake survivors, such as donating funds to support the American Red Cross' involvement in recovery efforts.
- To be sure you would be prepared to help in the event that a disaster strikes in your community, consider becoming a volunteer. You can go to www.redcross.org and click the "Preparing and Getting Trained" link to connect with your local chapter.

Helping Children

Remember that it's important for adults to care for themselves and tend to their own reactions as well as assisting their children with difficult feelings and thoughts. Children's reactions to stressful events are strongly influenced by their caregivers' reactions, plus parents will be more capable of helping their children cope if their own needs have been met.

- Explain to children what you're doing to ensure the family's safety.
- Be available to provide extra support and reassurance of safety (for example, at bedtime or before separations).
- Limit your child's exposure to news coverage, and to adult conversations about the disaster and its aftermath. Children are likely to misinterpret information and might become unnecessarily frightened.

- Provide children with a relaxed atmosphere for freely talking about the event. Listen carefully to their concerns and questions, reassure them that they are safe, and clarify any misperceptions they may have.
- For young children, follow conversations about stressful material with one of their preferred activities or stories to help them return to a state of calm.
- Find age-appropriate ways children can help survivors of the Haiti earthquake, such as donating a portion of their allowance to recovery efforts or organizing fund-raisers at school or in the community.
- If your child is afraid of a disaster affecting your family directly, take action to develop a family preparedness plan. The American Red Cross website includes guides for preparing at home for fires and other events, and children can participate in many steps such as creating emergency stores of food and water and practicing escaping safely. Helping children know how to take care of themselves in an emergency can decrease their anxiety.
- Educate your child about effective relief efforts, showing them how Haitian children and other survivors are being helped.

We are likely to be observing the pain of the Haitian people for years. To maintain your own well-being, it is important to neither deny nor be overwhelmed by this suffering. Through this tragedy we have an opportunity to teach ourselves and our children to be caring and thoughtful neighbors, balancing care for others with care for ourselves.