

# Trauma Response Program

# DISASTERS

## What are disasters?

Disasters are a common experience for many communities across the world. Disasters are divided into two categories: natural and human-caused. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines natural disasters as "large-scale geological or meteorological events that have the potential to cause loss of life or property," while human-caused disasters are similarly devastating events caused by humans.

Natural disasters can include:

- Hurricanes
- Earthquakes
- Tornadoes
- Wildfires,

Human-caused disasters can include:

- Industrial accidents
- Shootings
- Acts of terrorism
- Incidents of mass violence

The rate of disasters is steadily growing, through the effects of climate change and increased industrialization and population growth, leaving more communities in their wake. It is critical for mental health providers to identify signs of trauma and provide trauma-informed treatment when working with affected clients.

The type of natural disaster is highly associated with climate, geography, and typical weather patterns. Some types of natural disasters are considered typical or "expected" in certain regions. Tornado Alley, a region containing much of the US Midwest, is known for a high rate of tornado activity. Many areas, such as the US West Coast, have become accustomed to yearly droughts and the resulting forest fires.

However, this familiarity does not lessen the potential traumatic impacts of disasters when an individual or community is affected.

# Mental Health Following A Disaster

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Many individuals and communities that have experienced a natural or human-caused disaster display a range of stress symptoms. These symptoms can present on a spectrum, with some individuals showing minimal distress, while others experience significant trauma responses.

Not everyone who displays trauma symptoms following a disaster will develop a mental health condition, however, treatment for affected populations is still paramount.

## Common Symptoms Post-Disaster

- Avoidance Symptoms
  - Avoiding situations that remind you of the disaster
- Intrusive Memories
  - Can include dreams, flashbacks, memories or thoughts
- Negative Thinking and Mood
  - Feeling depressed, anhedonia, or detached
- Changes in Physical Responses
  - Feeling "on guard," anxious, having difficulty sleeping, etc.

## Who is Most Affected?

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While anyone can be affected by a disaster, some groups are at higher risk of both experiencing a disaster and suffering from traumatic side effects. Historically marginalized groups may reside in impoverished neighborhoods and homes, which may face irreparable damage from storms, earthquakes, or other natural disasters. Those of lower socioeconomic standing may work jobs that are at higher risk for workplace accidents. Furthermore, marginalized communities may also receive less support following disasters, intensifying feelings of loss and suffering.

Some studies have indicated that trauma responses following human-caused disasters are significantly higher than those following natural disasters. This may be due to the "preventable" nature of many human-caused disasters and the feelings of hopelessness that are associated with systemic injustice and social policy issues.

## Mental Health Care Following Community Tragedy

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We at the Trauma Response Program want to take space to acknowledge the shooting that occurred at Central Visual and Performing Arts High School on Monday October 24, 2022, and to grieve the students and educators lost or injured.

Community tragedies impact us all, even if we or our loved ones were not directly involved.

As those who care for community members, whether through direct clinical care, or through our roles coordinating, scheduling, and reaching out to families, we must process our own feelings of anger, sorrow, and loss in order to in turn, be able to provide support for those we serve.

## How to Talk to Clients/Patients After a Disaster

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Whether we work with children, teens, or adults, fear and grief surrounding a school shooting incident are likely to occur in our clients following a community tragedy.

Here are some skills we could utilize when we speak with clients following a traumatic event like a disaster:

- Communicate calmly
- Normalize and validate feelings of experiences
  - "It is understandable to feel overwhelmed/scared/anxious because of..."
- Utilize breathing and relaxation techniques
  - 3-5 deep breaths
  - Progressive muscle relaxation (tightening muscles in one area of body for 15-30 seconds and releasing)

### Let It All Out:

The Importance of  
Allowing Ourselves to Feel

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Emotions are an internal experience that often manifest as external physical symptoms. Our fear becomes labored breathing, our frustration becomes tears, or our anger becomes shaking.

Many of us attempt to manage our emotions by solely reorienting our thoughts away from the distress, but when our body becomes activated, this distraction may not last for long. Our coping strategies may take a backseat to the physical experience of distress.

New research suggests that allowing our bodies to express the pent-up activation that emotions bring on may be key to effectively processing and working through our emotional states. Physical exertion, such as going for a run or walk, or even allowing ourselves to cry or engage in controlled bouts of anger can help release that activation and tell our bodies that the "threat" has passed.

## Additional Resources

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- **American Psychological Association**
  - <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/task-force/child-trauma>
- **Missouri Department of Mental Health - Trauma Informed Care**
  - <https://dmh.mo.gov/trauma-informed-care>
- **National Child Traumatic Stress Network | <https://www.nctsn.org/>**
  - School Shooting Resources
    - <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/terrorism-and-violence/school-shooting-resources>
- **National Institute of Mental Health**
  - <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health>



American Psychological  
Association



Missouri  
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Mental Health



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## Trauma Response Program Contact Information

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