



Families and Disasters

People are usually surprised by how much a crisis or trauma affects them. It frequently changes the way they think, their values, habits, feelings and behaviour. It influences most aspects of their life. Usually people do not expect their families to be affected as much as they are, but a major event or crisis in the life of one member always influences the family. People usually underestimate the time it takes to recover from a crisis or trauma. Although it is made up of individuals, a family is a unit. What changes one member, changes the others. This also means there is a lot that family members can do to help each other in a time of crisis.

A crisis or trauma can also bring benefits to a family in the form of greater understanding, closeness or a new appreciation of each other. It can help to sharpen the focus on what is important in life. Sometimes a trauma or crisis can bring difficulties or misunderstanding within families. Family members may not understand each others reactions. They may have to adapt their behaviour to cope with these reactions. It may not always be clear how the feelings and bodily reactions are connected with what has happened, especially if they occur sometime after the event.

Most families overcome these problems when they begin to understand why they are occurring and accept that it will take time to recover. Some of the most common reactions to trauma and crisis are listed below.

Immediate effects

Some reactions may occur immediately after the crisis has passed and continue for some weeks.

- Spouses/parents may be afraid for their partner's/child's safety while away from home.
- Children and adults may have nightmares or develop fears that a fresh crisis will occur to them, or the family member involved.
- Family members may be angry because of the fear and distress they were put through; these feelings may be directed at the family member involved, at each other or at people outside the family.
- Family members may lose trust and confidence in themselves and other people. The world may no longer feel safe, their own welfare may seem uncertain, everything may seem too difficult to manage.

- Children express their insecurity by naughtiness, bed-wetting, changes in eating and sleeping habits, tearfulness and irritability, or reverting to behaviour they have grown out of.
- Emotional turbulence, anger, guilt, sadness, unpredictable behaviour or unreasonable reactions may occur in any family member.
- Communication may be difficult because family members do not know what to say to each other, or they do not feel like talking.

Medium term effects

Some families cope well with the crisis and immediate aftermath. Changes which are not obviously related to the crisis may occur some weeks or months after the incident.

- Routine and work patterns, ambition or motivation in the affected member or others in the family may change; work efficiency and concentration may be reduced.
- Spouses/parents may be short tempered, irritable or intolerant, leading to friction in relationships and misunderstanding between themselves and their children.
- Children or teenagers can be clingy, attention seeking or disobedient – this usually indicates they are anxious or fearful.
- Teenagers may become more rebellious or demanding, or through other behaviour, demonstrate a need to have a sense of control over their lives.
- Child or adult family members may be overly concerned to help. They may try hard not to do anything wrong and postpone their own needs to support the affected member.
- Family members' feelings for each other may change by becoming more detached, uninvolved or preoccupied with personal problems as each member tries to cope with their own reactions.

- Spouses may experience changes in their sexual relationship.
- Children and teenagers' school performance and concentration may be lowered; they may lose former interests.
- Family members may lose interest in leisure, recreation, sport or social activities.
- Teenagers may turn outside the family for emotional support from peers or other adults.
- Immediate post crisis responses may persist or sometimes begin to appear for the first time.
- Do things together: Ensure time is reserved for recreation, enjoyment and rewarding experiences. Shared pleasure carries a family through many difficulties.
- Keep family roles clear: Don't allow children to take too much responsibility for too long, even if they want to care for a distressed parent. Help members preserve their role and position in the family and support them. Don't overprotect children or adults. Be understanding if a member cannot fulfil their role for a time and talk about how they will resume when they are ready and able.

Long term effects

Sometimes problems become evident for the first time, months or years after the event.

- The memories of the traumatic event may come back for family members involved in another crisis, although it was dealt with at the time.
- Family members, including children, often need to go over the events again when they grow into new stages of maturity and develop a capacity for greater understanding.
- People may find future crises harder to handle, particularly when similar feelings are aroused, even if for different reasons.
- Family members may cover up or cope with difficult feelings until all the fuss is over and things have returned to normal, and only then show their distress.
- Any of the immediate or medium term effects may occur as delayed reactions or may become habits.
- Problems often appear in the form of everyday frustrations. Retracing the way they have developed and examining connections to the crisis often makes the cause clearer. It is wise to assume that a major change or problem in family members in the next few years has some relationship to the crisis.

These problems are all normal reactions to an abnormal event that has touched the lives of the whole family. It is important not to blame each other. Try to understand how members affect each other. It is part of a changed pattern of family life arising from the crisis.

Helpful things to do

A few simple things will help families recover from crisis.

- Keep communicating: Talk about what is happening, how members feel, what they need from each other. This avoids feeling alone, isolated and not understood. Don't leave communication to chance, make opportunities for it to happen.
- Share information: Communicate with children, teenagers and toddlers. They know something is going on and a painful reality is easier to deal with than the unknown worry of fear.

- Be active: Tackle problems, seek help, seek information and don't let small issues build up. Whatever the cause, stress leads to further problems. Stress factors don't add up, they multiply and make everything feel worse than it is.
- Look back: From time to time take stock of how each member has changed since the crisis. Look for the ways the crisis has influenced everyone for better or worse.
- Allow expressions of emotions: Support distressed family members and allow them time to find their way through their feelings. They may express distress many times before it diminishes. Suppressing emotions places them outside control and therefore outside recovery.
- Use other people: Keep in contact with support groups, other family, friends, neighbours, and workmates. Make sure the family doesn't become isolated and too involved with itself. Share the experience with those you trust. Most families have the ability to grow through crisis. But understanding its effects and actively dealing with them is necessary.

When to seek help

There are a number of signs that recovery may not be proceeding in a helpful way:

- Communication in the family is breaking down
- Parents do not understand their children's (or each other's) behaviour
- Things are not improving over time in the family
- There is evidence of deteriorating physical or emotional health in any family member
- Family members are not able to enjoy being together.

If you are concerned about yourself, your spouse, children or parents do not hesitate to contact someone trained to assess the situation and advise you. A little early help from a trained person can avoid long-term difficulty and give family members back confidence in themselves and each other.

Adapted from information issued by Queensland Health: Fact Sheets for Psychosocial Disaster Management

