



SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

This section helps community leaders understand the wide range of reactions people might have to an emergency and offers resources for recovery.

- » Leadership is a key factor in helping communities recover from an event and develop resiliency.
- » The psychological effects of traumatic events can be widespread and can occur far from the actual event.
- » The intensity of reactions can vary depending on the magnitude of the disaster, the level of trauma experienced, and other factors.
- » A variety of materials and services are available to help all members of your community, including older adults and children.

**POST-EVENT: LEADING YOUR COMMUNITY
TOWARDS RECOVERY AND RESILIENCY**



POST-EVENT: LEADING YOUR COMMUNITY TOWARDS RECOVERY AND RESILIENCY

As a leader, it is likely that your role will include helping your community cope with the impact of terrorism or a public health emergency and return to a regular routine. When the dust settles, you, your community, colleagues, and family might experience a wide range of reactions. This section describes those reactions and offers a list of resources that can help you lead your community down the road to recovery and resiliency.

One dictionary defines resiliency as a human ability to recover quickly from disruptive change, illness, or misfortune without being overwhelmed or acting in dysfunctional ways. However, in the context of public health emergencies, it can also be understood as not just struggling through from one crisis to another, but developing skills to learn how to become a stronger person along the way (adapted from: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1982. American Heritage Dictionary: 2nd College Edition).

As the frantic immediacy of the event passes, the issues and questions that community members are dealing with will become more complex and difficult to resolve. Depending on the type of event that occurred, there may be long-term physical health effects, economic problems, and infrastructure issues for the community as a whole. In addition, as on September 11, first responders may be among those most seriously affected, and there may need to be considerable reinforcement of those forces in order to fully restore the community services needed for a full recovery. Specific segments of the community may also be disproportionately affected.

A strong leader can help community members not only muster the stamina for the long road ahead but also help people learn from the event and transform negativity into resiliency for the future. As the days after September 11 demonstrated, America is a resilient society, but leadership plays a big part of fostering continued resiliency.

Because some issues a community will face may be unique, this section focuses on the psychological reactions and issues that a community is likely to face regardless of the type of event.

UNDERSTANDING THE REACTIONS OF THE COMMUNITY

RECOGNIZING THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Terrorism and disasters erode our sense of safety and sense of security—two of the most basic human needs. The physical impact of a terrorist or other public health emergency involving mass trauma and casualties is concrete and visible. The psychological impact, however, is much more subtle in nature, sending waves of shock and distress throughout the community, state, and nation. As such, the psychological suffering from an act of terrorism or a disaster may be more extensive than the physical injuries (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2003). Even a widespread disease outbreak, such as an influenza pandemic, can cause trauma and suffering in those who have not been physically affected.

RANGE OF REACTIONS

People who are exposed to traumatic events may experience a variety of reactions. These responses may be very different from reactions they have had to other stressful events in their lives in the past, and that difference itself can be unsettling and even frightening. Nevertheless, the majority of people's reactions are ordinary reactions to extraordinary events.

For most people, the resumption of everyday activities after a crisis and the resolution of stress reactions is an automatic process requiring little or no intervention other than “tincture of time.” But for others, the return to a regular routine is much more challenging. Any person, regardless of existing coping skills or psychological strength, may be particularly moved by a specific event. This is a sign of being human, not of being weak.

Table 10-1 lists some reactions common to people who experience traumatic stress. Although these cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physical reactions can be upsetting, they are normal reactions to extreme stresses (Jacobs, 2003).

A person experiencing any of these reactions may need to seek assistance from a mental health or medical professional if the reaction interferes with daily functioning. In addition, the



TABLE 10-1. REACTIONS COMMON TO PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCE TRAUMATIC STRESS

COGNITIVE REACTIONS	EMOTIONAL REACTIONS	BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS	PHYSICAL REACTIONS
Recurring dreams, nightmares, or thoughts about the event	Feeling frightened or anxious when reminded of the event	Avoiding activities or places that bring back memories of the event	Stomach upset/nausea
Having difficulty concentrating or remembering	Feeling numb, withdrawn, empty, or depressed	Isolating oneself from or having increased conflict with others	Diarrhea and cramps
Questioning one's spiritual or religious beliefs	Feeling bursts of anger or intense irritability	Startling easily, being tearful for no apparent reason, and having trouble sleeping	Elevated heart rate, blood pressure, or blood sugar

following reactions may indicate the need for medical intervention or a mental health evaluation:

- › Disorientation
- › Inability to care for oneself
- › Inability to manage the activities of daily living
- › Persistent flashbacks that do not diminish over time
- › Suicidal or homicidal thoughts or plans
- › Problematic use of alcohol or drugs
- › Domestic violence, child abuse, or elder abuse
- › Posttraumatic stress disorder

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE INTENSITY OF REACTIONS

In an emergency, stress reactions often surface after people have grappled with their immediate physical situations. The intensity of the reaction is determined by the magnitude of the disaster, the level of trauma experienced, and individual coping and stress management abilities. The intensity of the reaction may also be influenced by certain characteristics of the emergency, such as:

- › Threat to life
- › Severe physical harm or injury
- › Suffering intentional injury or harm
- › Exposure to images of the grotesque
- › Violent or sudden loss of a loved one
- › Witnessing or learning of violence toward a loved one

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

The basic law of terrorism is that even the smallest threat can ripple out to touch people a thousand miles away. The basic goal of psychological interventions is to understand the traumatic impact of terrorism and to use that understanding to minimize and contain the ripple effect within the individual, community, and our nation (Helping to Heal, American Psychological Association Report on the Oklahoma City Bombing, 1997).

Source: Community Resilience Project of Northern Virginia, Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation, and Substance Abuse Services. (2004). Helping to heal: A training on mental health response to terrorism. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.

PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

Numerous studies have found that trauma has negative effects on physical health. People who are exposed to traumatic events may be at increased risk not only for posttraumatic stress disorder but also major depression, panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and substance abuse. They may also have physical illnesses, including hypertension, asthma, and chronic pain syndromes (Yehuda, 2002). One study found that adults who reported traumatic experiences as children had higher rates of serious medical conditions, including cancer, heart disease, and chronic lung disease (Felitti et al., 1998).



“THE AIM OF TERROR IS TO BREAK A SOCIETY’S RESOLVE, to separate a society from its traditional values, to cause it to break internally. The result of ongoing terror is that people in Northern Ireland have experienced rising rates of alcoholism, domestic violence, suicide, smoking, drug abuse, and a general hollowing out of society. The violence has stopped, but we still don’t know how deeply the poison has run.”

Conor Brady, former editor, The Irish Times

From Reporting on Terrorism: The News Media and Public Health

- › Exposure or fear of exposure to a noxious agent
- › Intentional death or harm caused by others
- › A large number of deaths, especially the deaths of children

People experience emergencies through their own individual lenses. The meaning that a person assigns to the emergency and their personality, world view, and spiritual belief all contribute to how each person will perceive, cope with, and recover from the event (DeWolfe, 2000).

COMMUNITY MEMBERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Children, adolescents, and older adults may react differently to a traumatic experience. Terrifying events can cause overwhelming and unfamiliar physical and emotional reactions that can traumatize children, whereas older adults’ reactions to terrorism may be greatly affected by their physical needs. When an older adult already feels vulnerable due to changes in health, mobility, or cognitive ability, the feelings of powerlessness that may result from a terrorist event can be overwhelming. For more information on how to help community members with special needs, please see the additional resources at the end of this section.

ACTIVITIES THAT CAN HELP COMMUNITIES RECOVER

Officials and leaders can take important steps to promote societal post-crisis recovery. Here are a few suggestions:

- › Provide memorials and opportunities to grieve.
- › Celebrate heroes and acknowledge victims.
- › Recognize anniversaries.

- › Create opportunities for those who suffered badly or continue to suffer.
- › Take effective post-crisis actions, including improving local preparedness.

WORKING WITH LOCAL VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Some of your best resources for helping your community recover from a traumatic event are local organizations and institutions in the community, including the American Red Cross, the faith community, social service organizations, and schools. These types of local organizations can reach all sectors of the community—including those that are most vulnerable to trauma. Although you may already have relationships and partnerships with some of these organizations, consider branching out to other organizations or strengthening existing relationships before a disaster happens.

HELPING THE COMMUNITY COPE: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

You might want to consider making these materials, Web sites, and other resources available to your community members and/or staff. They may be helpful resources as you develop emergency plans and plan how to restore your community once the response to an emergency is over.



SERVICES AND TRAINING

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and Federal Emergency Management Agency

<http://www.samhsa.gov>

<http://www.fema.gov>

Through a collaborative agreement with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, administers crisis counseling, training programs, and community outreach after presidentially-declared disasters. The SAMHSA Emergency Response Grant (SERG) program also provides limited resources for communities needing mental health and substance abuse emergency response services when a presidential declaration of disaster has not occurred.

Emergency Management Institute

<http://www.training.fema.gov/>

The Emergency Management Institute offers many courses for first responders and public officials. The course “Recovery from Disaster: The Local Government Role,” which comes in a 4-day version taught at the Emergency Management Institute and a one-and-a-half day version that is taught in the field, is one that may be particularly useful in helping public officials help their communities recover. Other courses from the 2006–07 catalogue can be found at <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/downloads/pdf/publications/fa-273-508.pdf>.

State and Local Health Departments

Contact your state or local health department for more information on federal and/or state grants, disaster response plans, and mental health services that might be offered in your community to assist in the preparation for, or aftereffects of, a public health emergency or terrorist event.

SPECIFIC PUBLICATIONS

Center for Mental Health Services

<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/>

› **Care Tips for Survivors of a Traumatic Event: What to Expect in Your Personal, Family, Work, and Financial Life**, available at <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/KEN-01-0097/default.asp>.

Covers things to remember when trying to understand disaster events, signs that adults need stress management assistance, and ways to ease stress

› **Mental Health Aspects of Terrorism**, available at <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/KEN-01-0095/default.asp>.

Describes typical reactions to terrorist events and provides suggestions for coping and helping others

› **Anniversary Reactions to a Traumatic Event: The Recovery Process Continues**, available at <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/NMH02-0140/default.asp>.

Describes anniversary reactions among victims of traumatic events and explains how these reactions can be a significant part of the recovery process

National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

› **Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters**, available at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/violence.cfm>.

Describes the impact of violence and disasters on children and adolescents and offers suggestions for minimizing long-term emotional harm

National Mental Health Association

<http://www.nmha.org/>

› **How to Cope with the War & Threats of Terrorism: Tips for Older Adults**, available at <http://www1.nmha.org/reassurance/olderadulthoodtipsWar.cfm>.

Outlines some common responses of older adults following a disaster and provides tips for coping

