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NEWSLETTER

Issue 39

AFTER THE TSUNAMI...

How to Cope With Human Tragedy

The tsunami that recently hit the coastal regions of Southeast Asia has created a human tragedy beyond the imaginable. The emotional impact of this disaster has been felt by people everywhere: survivors, family members and friends of victims, rescue workers, emergency medical personnel, volunteers, media representatives, members of the communities, citizens of the countries - the world. As the death toll continues to rise and many persons still remaining missing, there is a sense of horror, helplessness, grief, and depression that reverberates through our global community. For those individuals who are waiting to hear about what has happened to family, co-workers, friends, the distress is particularly overwhelming.

Common Reactions to Trauma

Everyone responds differently to trauma. Most people who directly experience a major trauma have severe reactions in the immediate aftermath. Many individuals then feel better within a three month period of time. However, others recover more slowly, and some do not recover without professional help.

Some of the most common problems include:

Re-experiencing of the trauma. People who have been traumatized often experience flashbacks, nightmares, and unwanted thoughts of the event. Because a traumatic event is so shocking and so different from everyday experience, the mind keeps bringing the memories back as if to somehow understand or try to make sense of the event.

Increased arousal. People who have experienced a trauma may feel shaky, startle easily, have difficulty concentrating, experience irritability or outbursts of anger, and have problems with sleeping. The body's *fight or flight response* is on continuous alert, as if in preparation for another attack.

Avoidance. People will often manage trauma-related pain by avoiding the activities, places, thoughts or feelings associated with the traumatic event. This can lead to feelings of numbness or detachment from others.

Want to Help?

To offer assistance to the victims of the tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia, please contact the following organizations:

The Canadian Red Cross National Office

170 Metcalfe Street, Suite 300,
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 2P2

www.redcross.ca

1-800-418-1111

UNICEF Canada

2200 Young St., Suite 1100
Toronto, Ontario M4S 2C6

www.unicef.ca

1-877-955-3111

World Vision Canada

1 World Drive
Mississauga, ON
L5T 2Y4

www.worldvision.ca

1-800-268-5528

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AFTER THE TSUNAMI... (continued)

Tips for Coping and Dealing With Stress

1. Acknowledge that your physical, mental and emotional reactions are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
2. Keep to your normal daily routine. Familiar life patterns can be very comforting.
3. Commit to eating healthy, exercising, and getting enough rest.
4. Spend time with others - family and friends. Coping is easier when people support each other.
5. Talk with someone about your experiences and your feelings. Be willing to listen to others who may need to talk about theirs.
6. Take time to grieve. It's okay to cry...
7. Engage in rituals or other symbolic activities that support your expression of feelings.
8. Find ways to relax and be gentle with yourself. Go for a walk, sit in the sun, take a hot bath, spend time with a pet.
9. Limit your responsibilities. If you are trying to do too much, give up a few things that are not absolutely necessary. Ask yourself, "What's the one thing I can do today that will make a difference?"
10. Do not hold yourself responsible for the traumatic event; recognize that you cannot control everything.

Helping Children Cope

1. Take the time to listen to your child. Encourage your child's expression of feelings or concerns. Validate your child's feelings and let your child know it is okay to feel upset when something bad or scary happens.
2. Recognize the impact of your own emotional reactions upon your child. Provide reassurance to your child that he/she is safe with you.

3. Maintain daily routines. Familiar activities can provide comfort and reassurance.
4. Limit exposure to media coverage of the trauma. Younger children may not understand words but do remember visual images.
5. Be honest when answering your child's questions. Keep responses at the level of your child's interest and understanding.
6. With older children, they may want to know how they can help or make a difference. Offer suggestions, such as volunteer involvement in donation-raising activities.
7. Encourage participation in rituals, memorials or other symbolic activities.

When Should Someone Seek Professional Help?

Sometimes people require extra help in recovering from a traumatic event. This is usually dependent upon the severity of the event, an individual's exposure to the event, the seriousness of the threat to life, history of past trauma, and pre-existing psychological problems.

An individual may need professional help if three months after the trauma he or she:

- Still feels fearful most of the time
- Continues to experience flashbacks, nightmares, or intrusive recollections of the trauma
- Is withdrawn from usual activities and unable to work/manage household responsibilities
- Has important relationships that are falling apart
- Uses alcohol or drugs to cope

If you suspect that you or someone you know may need help, call your EAP counsellor now.

Family Services offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call:

1-800-668-9920