

## **HANDOUT 3: COMMON REACTIONS TO DISASTER**

### **INTRODUCTION**

People who experience or witness a disaster, often feel intense emotions that can last long after the initial danger has passed. Sometimes even learning second-hand about a loved one's experience of a trauma can evoke strong feelings. While individual responses following a disaster vary from person to person, four core emotions are almost universal reactions: fear/anxiety, sadness/depression, guilt/shame, and anger/irritability.

These core negative feelings can also be accompanied by thoughts that increase distress, such as thinking you don't have the right to your feelings, or that something is wrong with you for feeling the way you do. You may fear that others will judge you, that you are losing control, or that you are out of control. Or you may find yourself repeating over and over that you just "SHOULDN'T" be feeling this way. Sometimes how people think about their feelings can start a vicious cycle that makes the feelings stronger and even more intense. You will learn more about the relationship between thoughts and feelings, and how to alter them, in the cognitive restructuring part of this intervention.

### **FEAR AND ANXIETY**

Fear can range from a mild, diffuse anxiety to a chronic sense of dread to acute feelings of terror and panic. These feelings, which vary in intensity from person to person, can feel like they come from "out of the blue," or they can be caused by thoughts and memories of the disaster. They can also be evoked by external events, known as triggers, that remind us of the event.

Fear and anxiety can also affect our thoughts, our bodies, and our views of other people, the world, and ourselves. Fear can convince us that the world is not a safe place, that we cannot trust other people, or even ourselves. Some people become afraid of the feelings themselves, thinking that they are in some way abnormal because they feel afraid or that the feelings mean they're going crazy. In this program you will learn a variety of skills that have been proven to help people reduce fear and anxiety.

### **ANGER AND IRRITABILITY**

Anger is an understandable and normal reaction to perceived injustice, violation, unfair treatment, or loss of control. At its root, anger can be an adaptive emotion directed at increasing self-protection. When we are angry, our bodies feel energized and ready to fight to protect ourselves and our loved ones. But there are also many problems related to chronic anger, especially when it is misdirected at people or leads to violence, when it can interfere with close relationships and the ability to work or parent, and contribute to health conditions such as high blood pressure and heart disease. People often experience irritability and anger as pressure building in their bodies, and they may notice the impulse to lash out, or do something physical to relieve the feelings. For these reasons, anger can be scary or confusing if you're not sure what to do about it. It can also be frightening and confusing to other people around you, who may have

difficulty understanding you. In this program you will learn ways of managing hostility and anger to prevent the negative effects that they could otherwise have on you and your loved ones.

## **SADNESS AND DEPRESSION**

Sadness and depression occur naturally in response to loss. Following a disaster, a sense of loss can stem from the death of a friend or loved one, loss of property or job, or loss of your previous way of life. Sadness and depression can also be related to a felt loss of innocence, religious faith or faith in your fellow human beings. You may find that memories and feelings related to past losses arise alongside the present ones. You may also feel that you will never be the same person as you were before this tragedy, or that you are in some way forever changed. Sadness is an important part of the grieving process, in which you realize the value of something you have lost and pay tribute to (or honor) it.

Feelings of depression can also result from the interruption caused by the disaster to your routine, including your regular engagement in activities that used to bring enjoyment and meaning to your life, such as time with loved ones, work, sports, and hobbies. It is normal for someone to feel sad or depressed when they suddenly stop doing the things that made them happy and gave them a sense of purpose. Sadness or depression can be experienced as frequent crying spells, loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed, desire to be alone all the time, low energy, or fatigue. You may also feel numb or empty, wishing you could cry, but feeling unable to do so. Feelings of hopelessness and despair can also accompany sadness, alongside thoughts that the feelings will never stop or go away. In this program you will learn a variety of skills that have been proven to reduce the symptoms of depression.

In some cases, feelings of sadness or depression might be accompanied by stopping planning for the future, or even thinking that you would be better off dead. Fleeting thoughts of hurting oneself or of being dead are not uncommon in depression. If you are having such thoughts, or you are actively planning on taking your life or harming yourself, you should tell your therapist immediately.

## **GUILT AND SHAME**

Guilt and shame are common, yet very distressing emotions that people often feel in the wake of a disaster. Guilt and shame may be brought on by thoughts about things you did or didn't do before, during, or following the disaster. Although you may realize that the reasoning behind the guilt or shame isn't very logical, these thoughts may haunt you and make it difficult to move on with your life. For example, you might think, "I should have done more to help;" or "If only I had invited my friend to breakfast, she would still be alive today." Or you may be ashamed of how you responded to the terror of the situation – by running away, hiding, or crying.

You may feel guilty about emotions that they feel following a trauma. You may feel you don't have a right to be angry, or that it is stupid to still be frightened by triggers. Many people feel that they should be over this by now, or if they were just stronger, or more courageous they wouldn't be having these feelings. Some people feel guilt about the effects that their reactions have on other people at work, with friends, or on family. Others may think that "bad things

happen to bad people," so they must deserve the suffering and pain resulting from the trauma. Some disaster survivors experience "survivor guilt," where you feel guilty that you lived when someone else did not. Others may feel guilty because their friends and family were spared when others were killed, injured, or suffered serious property damage or other losses. In this program, you will learn skills to help you manage and overcome feelings of guilt and shame you may have.