

SELF- CARE AND SAFETY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Here are a few thoughts that may help you through these terrible times and the days ahead. Many of the reactions that you are experiencing feel anything but normal, but it can help to remind yourself that it is *what happened* that's actually abnormal, not your reactions to it. People respond to disaster in predictable ways, and knowing what to expect can ease the stress and help you cope, survive, and even recover.

STAGES AND REACTIONS: The first stages many people go through are **shock** and **denial**. Everything seems like a bad dream --- unreal. You may feel detached, dazed, or numb. Tearing yourself away from the television coverage can be very tough to do as the mind tries to take in events it has no framework to comprehend. Thoughts of “why” and even guilt at being alive may be hard to shake. You may have more trouble concentrating, remembering, problemsolving, and communicating.

Along with shock comes **fear** and **anxiety** for your own safety and for the safety of others. If such a terrible thing could happen, almost anything seems possible. We feel so **vulnerable** and **out of control**. We take many more precautions and need much more reassurance. We may feel **avoidance**, of painful thoughts and feelings and even of flying itself. “Startle reactions” are common. Being separated from loved ones can seem unbearably difficult. It can be hard to see anything but more trauma and setbacks in the future.

As the reality begins to sink in, shock, denial and fear are followed by **anger**. Many of us will feel intense anger over such violence, destruction and loss, even **rage** at the thought of our people and equipment being coldly used as the weapon of committing such terrible crimes against humanity. Anger and rage can easily get directed and expressed inappropriately at others...that urge to respond to hurt by inflicting hurt. The **grief** of realizing such catastrophic pain and loss can seem overwhelming, especially if you have a personal connection.

You may also experience physical reactions, including fatigue, headache, chills, dry mouth, difficulty breathing, sleep disturbances, digestive problems, profuse sweating, visual, nervous, or digestive upsets, rapid heart rate, tremors and dizziness, and muscle and joint aches and stiffness.

Normal stress reactions may last a few days, a few weeks, or even longer. Often they come in “waves”, alternating periods of intense discomfort with periods of relief. Some may have a delayed onset, even weeks after an event. They can be especially difficult to handle when our very survival has been challenged and we are being called upon to perform extra duties “above and beyond” to ensure safety, control, and customer service, and put our own feelings and concerns on the side.

None of these feelings and reactions is abnormal, but they can seem overwhelming and endless. This is a time when we need to be careful to monitor our own hurt, grief and rage---and to strive for patience and tolerance with others who are hurting.

SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOURSELF:

REMEMBER: Normal people react to abnormal situations. Give yourself permission to go through the feelings and reactions. If you push them away, they will last longer: let them flow through you and they will pass.

DRINK LOTS OF WATER: This helps dilute the stress chemicals in your system, protect your nervous system, and flush out the toxic waste products of stress.

TALK, TALK, TALK: Share your thoughts and feelings with others. You'll find you're not alone. Write about what's going on. Try not to get isolated even if you want to be alone.

KEEP TO NORMAL ROUTINES: As much as you can, live the life you know and recognize. Keeping busy and taking care of chores and the business of your life can help you feel clearer and more in control.

INCREASE EXERCISE / MOVEMENT: Try to get at least 30 minutes of exercise each day. Move and stretch. Exercise not only helps clear your body of stress toxins, but it has a proven anti-depressant effect. Through movement you can "blow off steam", decrease feelings of restlessness and confinement, and improve your sleep.

GET ADEQUATE REST: The demands of terrible times, both physical and mental, can be extraordinary. Rest helps both body and mind renew themselves. Even if you aren't sleeping well, try to rest as much as you can.

MONITOR USE OF ALCOHOL AND CAFFEINE: Alcohol is a depressant, and it chemically worsens and prolongs the stress reaction. Caffeine and other stimulants increase the sensitivity of already-stressed nervous systems. Both can contribute to loss of control, bad choices, and inappropriate behavior.

EAT REGULAR, HEALTHY MEALS: Rough roads mean your body needs quality fuel. Avoid highly sugared or starchy foods, and fats. Get lots of fresh fruits and vegetables.

TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN: Even when kids don't exactly understand what's happening, they are very sensitive to adult emotions, even those that are unspoken. The younger they are, the more likely kids are to think it's about them, and to see distant tragedies as personal threats. Kids need to know 1) that you love them no matter what, 2) that you'll be there to take care of them, and 3) that it's not their fault. Keep saying it, keep reminding them. Remind yourself, too. Grownups need love and care and reassurance too.

REACH OUT: Nobody should have to handle things alone, including you.

TAKE A MOMENT: It's a good idea to set aside even 3 minutes each day to stop, look about you, breathe deep, and quiet your mind. Pray if you can, and let yourself listen for the response. Try to think of one thing each day for which you can be truly grateful. Allow yourself to wish for something hopeful. Especially now, when the world seeks explanations, accountability, and justice, let your mind rest just a little in peace.

CULTIVATE BALANCE: Let yourself enjoy something. Play a little. That's why they call it "re-creation". Keeping perspective means seeing good as well as bad. As Churchill said, living well is the best revenge. The more awful things are, the greater our need for the balancing quality of pleasure, and the re-affirmation that being alive is about joy.