

SOME TIPS FOR COPING AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

An event such as the Christchurch earthquake, which is outside the range of usual experience, can be acutely distressing. It is not unusual to have a stress reaction to such a major event. These stress reactions are your psychological attempts to cope with what for some will be overwhelming events. Just as the body may go into shock after a physical injury, it is normal to experience a type of emotional or psychological shock in response to an event such as this.

Normal reactions to the earthquake

Everyone's reaction and experience is a very personal one. However, the following list is a guide to possible normal reactions:

- Preoccupation with the earthquake and its results
- Anger and irritability
- Anxiety
- Increased emotionality, feelings seem to be of a greater intensity than is usual; or, conversely, a numbing which prevents awareness of feeling
- Over-talkativeness or, its opposite, isolating from others
- Sleep disturbance, with or without nightmares
- Survivor guilt
- Recalling of past traumatic events or grieving
- Difficulty with concentration and/or memory
- Confused thinking and difficulty making decisions
- Depression or grief

These reactions should gradually decrease over time, but it is quite normal for them to persist for a period of weeks or months. They are not a sign of 'not coping', but are normal. As in any situation, it is not a sign of weakness to ask for help. If symptoms as above are not decreasing, then extra help for the individual is indicated.

Do not be surprised if you have different reactions at different times. Having reactions in this manner allows you to avoid an emotional overload.

Also, do not be surprised if you find you are overly attentive to matters relating to safety. After an event such as an earthquake it is common for people to become concerned or preoccupied with their safety or the safety of others. It is normal to want to feel that we can do something to prevent further awful things from occurring.

As a result of the above, people are more accident-prone and if you are driving or undertaking other responsibilities, there is a greater risk of making mistakes or not doing what you would normally do.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

While stress reactions are normal, how we deal with them does make a significant difference in how much these reactions will disrupt our lives. Some ways of "reacting to the reactions" are more helpful than others. In fact, not dealing effectively with these stress responses can greatly delay recovery from them.

The following suggestions are often useful ways of coping effectively and building your resilience.

- Do not isolate yourself. While getting away from everyone may immediately feel less threatening or less distressing, it very often impedes healing.
- Remind yourself of coping strategies which have worked for you in the past. Use your proven resilience techniques.
- Talk out what happened and most importantly, how you feel about what happened. Telling what happened while avoiding your feelings leaves you with just telling "war stories". Telling your story to identify and express the feelings you experienced helps make any unpleasant feelings more bearable.
- Accept the concern and care of others.
- Reach out to your family and close friends - to those you trust and know care about you.
- Eat healthy food and beverages. Using alcohol or drugs to "self-medicate" will delay your recovery from the stress that you have experienced.
- Do something nice for yourself.
- Acknowledge and support those you work with, including the things you have done for one another that was helpful or comforting in the past.
- Stay in touch with one another at work to see how each other are doing including how your reactions may be affecting you at work.
- Do something to help someone else. This can be helpful to your own recovery.
- Exercise, it can re-energize you and help to clear your mind.
- Remember, your reactions are normal and are likely to be shared by others.

DO

- some physical exercise even if you do not feel like it, for this will alleviate some of the physical reactions
- force yourself to eat regular, well balanced meals
- eliminate or at least cut down on the amount of caffeine consumed – that is coffee, teas, colas, or chocolate. Instead drink water, fruit juices, herbal teas
- expect the earthquake and the after shocks to bother you
- give yourself permission to feel rotten but share your feelings with others
- talk with a trusted friend/ partner/ colleague – talk is the most healing medicine
- help your co-workers by sharing your feelings and checking out how they are doing
- structure your time – keep busy
- allow yourself some private time
- spend time with others
- do make small decisions as you are able which give you a feeling of control over your life, for example if someone asks you what you want to eat, answer them even if you are not sure
- do things that make you feel good
- have realistic expectations for recovery

DON'T

- use legal or illegal substances (such as excessive alcohol) to numb the consequences of the traumatic event
- take sleeping pills without medical advice
- fight sleeplessness – get up, read, walk, exercise, keep a journal, write your thoughts down
- try to fight recurring thoughts, images or flashbacks – they are normal and will decrease over time and become less painful
- watch too many media reports of the earthquake
- give interviews with the media – it will place more demands on you when you are already highly stressed
- label yourself as "crazy" or "I'm losing it" – instead tell yourself that you are normal and having normal reactions
- make any major decisions or big life changes
- automatically stay away from work – going to work (as long as it is safe to do so) will help you to get back to normal

Stress-relieving activities are not as difficult or time consuming as we may think. A 15-minute walk during a break: talking to a co-worker, supervisor, or mental health worker; or just learning and using deep breathing exercises can significantly reduce stress.

It's important to eat nutritional foods, avoid drinking large amounts of caffeine and alcohol, get some exercise whenever possible, and get as much sleep as you can. That way you'll be better able to continue meeting the challenges of your job or your personal situation.

If you feel that you need to get some professional help to develop strategies for coping with your reactions to the earthquake and how it has affected you, phone your Employee Assistance Programme on **0800 787 2867**.

SOME NUMBERS THAT MAY ASSIST

EARTHQUAKE COMMISSION

- Claims can be lodged with EQC by calling the free-phone on **0800 326 243** at any time. If lines are busy please keep trying. Staff are dealing with claims as quickly as possible.
- You have 3 months to lodge a claim from the time the event occurred.
- When you call EQC, they ask you who you are insured with and for your idea of the extent of damage. They will then let you know whether someone will call to help with your claim, or whether you can go ahead and get the repair done. This will be followed up in writing.
- If you are unsure about your insurance cover, please call 0800 326 243 anyway and they will do all they can to check it for you.

CIVIL DEFENCE

People requiring information on income support, housing options, health issues, community assistance, Civil Defence or any other government service can call 0800 779 997.

GENERAL TIPS

FOOD

- Eat perishable foods, for example bread and meat first.
- Eat canned foods last.
- Minimise food spoilage by opening the fridge or freezer only when you need to take food out.
- Do not eat vegetables or fruits that have been lying in flood water.
- Cover all food with plastic wrap or store in waterproof containers.
- Throw out rotting or tainted food before it spoils other food.

WATER

- The following household facilities can be used to cook, wash dishes, and wash your hands:
 - hot water cylinder
 - toilet cistern - as long as no chemical toilet cleaner is present
 - bottled water
 - spa/ swimming pool water - can use to wash yourself and your family.

Boil or purify water before using it in food preparation and to avoid cross-contamination of food. Once boiled, cover and store in a clean container and place in the fridge (if it's working) or in some other cool place. Re-boil the water if it is not used within 24 hours.

If you do not have power to boil water then purifying tablets or bleach can be added to ensure its safety. Add five drops of household bleach per litre of water and leave for 30 minutes.

ANIMALS

- Emergency animal welfare incidents can be reported on 03 366 3886.
- Anyone who had lost an animal for more than 24 hours should call SPCA Track-A-Pet on 0900 56 787.

HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY THE EARTQUAKE

- Be available, but don't intrude
- Accept the response you get
- Show your interest in the person, not just the situation
- Give practical support
- Listen, rather than talk
- Be careful with advice
- Don't make light of the situation

Immediate Support

- If the person wants to, allow them to tell you what has happened - include what they thought happened
- Do not rely on the person knowing their own needs. They may be disoriented. Assess and prompt them to consider needs and help them make their own decisions
- Does the person need to be alone or wind down with you?
- Spend some time with the person
- Be proactive. Let the person know you will keep in contact
- Avoid jokes, humour, expressing your own feelings or assuming what happened until you check their experience
- Does the person have adequate support outside work?
- Check on how the person is sleeping
- Accept the reactions below as normal.
- If you don't live with them, phone and keep in good contact (later that evening, next day)
- Don't try to be a counsellor – focus your efforts on practical care and listening

If you have concerns about anyone's safety or are worried about the person, suggest that they contact the Employee Assistance Programme which is provided by Stratos.

Phone 0800 787 2867