

Supporting Someone After a Disaster



What You Should Know

Being a good friend to someone who has had exposure to a disaster or the death of a loved one involves empathy, patience, persistence, and a willingness to listen and be available whenever the friend/loved one needs it. He/she may need to talk or be supported immediately, and then not want to talk at all for months or years. Try to watch, listen, and follow his/her lead as to when and where you can provide the kind of support that will be most calming. Traumatic stress and loss—as opposed to regular stress—can affect a person for years or even decades. When a person has a reaction to a reminder, no matter how long after the event, he/she needs patience and empathy. It is like the difference between having a strained muscle that responds well to stretching and exercising (“getting back on the horse”) versus a torn cartilage that needs some support and bracing for a period of time before it can be stretched (empathy, understanding, time to heal).

What Can Help

- **Educate yourself.** Advice we might give in response to common stresses may not be helpful in these situations. For instance, some of the unhelpful things we might say are telling them to “move on,” “get back on the horse that threw you,” or “get on with life.” We might try to get him/her to “cheer up.” Using this strategy can make a person who has experienced a disaster or a death feel ashamed or think that he/she is still negatively impacted or that you don’t understand the depth of the tragedy.
- **Be patient.** Be tolerant of stress reactions and strong emotions and remain empathic as time passes.
- **Be understanding.** If your friend/loved one wants to talk, listen carefully, and support, comfort, and accept him/her; try to understand as best you can, reflect back what you have heard, and empathize (try to appreciate how difficult this must be, how hard it must have been).
- **Ask questions.** If you don’t know what to say or do in response to his/her talking with you, you can share that you are not sure how you can be helpful, but you want to be. Ask what he/she needs right now. Tailor your support to the needs, capacities, and desires of your friend/loved one.
- **Be realistic.** If you find that you are not the best person to be a support for any reason, direct him/her to the social support that seems most helpful.
- **Be persistent.** Find ways to reach out and connect to him/her, even though he/she may be withdrawing from contact with others.
- **Help with practical needs.** Use creative problem-solving and help with his/her practical needs.
- **Understand the impact of triggers.** Understand that there are many reminders that can trigger reactions in your friend/loved one, even long after the disaster. If your friend/loved one reacts to a reminder, be supportive, understanding, and let him/her know that there is no “time limit” on reactions, and no time limit on your willingness to support him/her.
- **Honor the deceased.** If your friend/loved one is grieving the death of a loved one, encourage positive memories of the deceased, and honor the meaning and significance of the relationship. You may also participate in cultural rituals or traditions.
- **Encourage self-care.** Encourage your friend/loved one to take time outs from grief for self-care activities, such as relaxation, exercise, and improving sleep habits.
- **Support getting help.** Encourage a consultation with a doctor or counselor if your friend/loved one is still having significant distress or difficulty with daily life functioning after several months.
- **Take care of yourself.** Find ways to take care of yourself if your loved one/friend’s reactions take a toll on you.