



Disaster Mental Health Institute UNIVERSITY of SOUTH DAKOTA

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A South Dakota Board of Regents Center of Excellence

COPING WITH THE AFTERMATH OF AN AVIATION DISASTER

People have lost loved ones, and many more have shared their sense of loss and the horror that resulted from this aviation disaster.

Some people are living in motels or hotels for days under trying circumstances. This disruption and dislocation only adds to the stress of the loss and the disaster itself. Your future may be uncertain, you may have financial concerns and feel that things will never be “normal” again.

You are living through experiences that are emotionally traumatic. They would challenge anyone's ability to cope. As this disaster recovery continues the experience will wear more heavily on everyone's resources and emotions.

Below are some reactions common to people who experience traumatic stress. Although these thoughts, feelings, and actions can be very upsetting, it is important to remember that they are ordinary reactions to an extraordinary and very stressful situation.

Thoughts

- Recurring dreams or nightmares about the crash.
- Reconstructing the events surrounding the crash or the crash scene in your mind, in an effort to make it come out differently.
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things.
- Questioning your spiritual or religious beliefs.
- Repeated thoughts or memories of loved ones that have died, or of the crash or crash scene which are hard to stop.

Feelings

- Feeling numb, withdrawn, or disconnected.
- Feeling frightened or anxious when things like the sound of a jet or particular smells remind you of the crash.
- Feeling a lack of involvement or enjoyment in everyday activities.
- Feeling depressed, blue, or down much of the time.
- Feeling bursts of anger, or intense irritability.
- Feeling a sense of emptiness or hopelessness about the future.

Behaviors

- Being overprotective of your and your family's safety.
- Isolating yourself from others.
- Becoming very alert at times, and startling easily.
- Having problems getting to sleep or staying asleep.
- Avoiding activities that remind you of the crash or crash scene; avoiding places or people that bring back memories.
- Having increased conflict with family members.
- Keeping excessively busy to avoid thinking about the crash and what has happened to you.
- Being tearful or crying for no apparent reason.

Coping

Healing and recovering from the emotional effects of the crash will take a long time. When you can, allow yourself to feel sadness and grief over what has happened. Talking to others about how you are feeling is important.

Try to keep in place family routines such as regular meal times and other family rituals. These will help you to feel as though your life has some sense of order.

Upsetting times can cause people to drink alcohol or to use drugs in a way that causes other problems. Try to cope with your stress without increasing your use of alcohol and drugs. Alcohol and drugs won't help in the long run.

Healthy practices such as eating well and getting enough sleep are especially important in times of high stress.

Forgive yourself and others when you act out because you are stressed. This is a difficult time, and everyone's emotions are closer to the surface. But also be certain that your stress does not become an excuse for child abuse or spouse abuse.

Don't let yourself become isolated. Maintain connections with your community friends, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, or church members. Talk about your experiences with them.

When to Seek Professional Assistance

A few general guidelines may be useful in deciding when normal reactions to disaster become problems requiring assistance:

- 1) when disturbing behaviors or emotions last more than four to six weeks;
- 2) when a person's behaviors or emotions make it difficult to function normally (including functioning at work, in the family, or at school); or
- 3) anytime an individual feels unstable or concerned about his or her behaviors or emotions.