

Emotional and Physical Responses Following a Disaster

Survivor's Guilt

- Feeling responsible for surviving when others did not
- Feeling guilty that one's property remained intact while others lost theirs.
- Overwhelming guilt for actions taken or not taken during the disaster.
- Reliving the event and imagining different outcomes, wondering if more could have been done to help others.
- Difficulty accepting the "randomness" of disaster outcomes, wondering "Why me?" when reflecting on what was spared versus what was lost.

Grief

- Intense sorrow for the loss of life, homes, treasured possessions & anguish for the loss of the town's historical and cultural touchstones.
- Mourning the loss of cherished landmarks, local stores, and other familiar places that gave a sense of identity and belonging.
- Disorientation caused by the loss of familiar reference points, making the town feel foreign and unrecognizable.
- Emotional numbness or disbelief, struggling to accept the extent of the devastation.
- A sense of longing for the way things were, accompanied by a feeling of helplessness about the changed landscape.

Anxiety

- Constant worry about future safety or potential harm
- Physical symptoms like rapid heartbeat, trembling, dizziness, or shortness of breath
- Feeling on edge, or an overwhelming sense of doom

Post-Traumatic Stress

- Re-experiencing the trauma through flashbacks, nightmares, or intrusive thoughts
- Avoidance of places, people, or activities that remind of the traumatic event
- Changes in mood, feeling detached, and persistent negative beliefs about oneself or others
- Fear of smoke, sound of sirens, wind, sleeping in buildings like shelters (belief they may catch fire)

Depression

- Persistent sadness or feeling of emptiness
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- Changes in appetite, sleep patterns, or energy levels

Physical Symptoms

- Fatigue or exhaustion, Muscle tension or headaches, Stomach problems or digestive disturbances, Changes in appetite or weight, Insomnia, teeth/jaw pain, clenching, Disruption in hygiene

It's important for individuals to recognize these reactions and seek appropriate help if needed. Everyone's experience and response to trauma will vary, and professional guidance can provide personalized strategies and support.

Dissociation

- Feeling detached from one's surroundings or from one's body
- Feeling as if the world is unreal or dreamlike
- Difficulty remembering details about the traumatic event

Substance Use or Abuse

- Using drugs or alcohol to cope with distressing emotions
- Increase in the amount or frequency of substance use
- Dependence or addiction as a result of increased use following the disaster

Changes in Behavior and Personality (behaviors previously not seen in someone)

- Irritability, anger, or outbursts of aggression
- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions

Sleep Disturbances

- Difficulty falling asleep, with an active mind replaying traumatic events.
- Frequent waking throughout the night, often related to nightmares or vivid dreams associated with the disaster.
- Restless and unrefreshing sleep, leading to fatigue during the day.
- Fear of nighttime, particularly if the disaster occurred during the night or if darkness brings back memories of the event.
- Changes in sleep patterns, like sleeping more than usual as an escape, or avoiding sleep due to fear of nightmares.
- Physical discomfort, such as pain or aches, making it harder to sleep soundly.

Vicarious Trauma

- Vicarious trauma, happens when an individual becomes traumatized not by directly experiencing a traumatic event, but by hearing about or being exposed to another person's traumatic experience.
- Symptoms often mirror those of PTSD and can include:
 - Intense feelings of sadness, anger, or distress after hearing about someone else's traumatic experience.
 - Intrusive thoughts or imagery of another person's trauma.
 - Diminished engagement in daily activities or things that used to bring joy.
 - Heightened state of arousal, constantly on edge or jumpy.
 - Difficulty separating personal emotions from those of the trauma survivor.
 - Increased cynicism, numbness, or feelings of hopelessness.
 - Avoidance behaviors – avoiding places, people, or things that serve as reminders of the trauma narrative.
 - Changes in spiritual beliefs or a shaken worldview.
- Particularly common among caregivers, therapists, emergency responders, or anyone who is in a role of helping or listening to trauma survivors.

It's important for individuals to recognize these reactions and seek appropriate help if needed. Everyone's experience and response to trauma will vary, and professional guidance can provide personalized strategies and support.