

Dealing with Disaster

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“Following disaster one should aim for betterment, not simply replacement – so something positive can come from the experience”

Disaster is a very topical theme at the moment, as it has been very real to many people in recent times. I am no expert in this area, so I wish to share with you what research, experts and people experiencing disaster, have recommended.

In the last few months we have been confronted with a number of severe disasters locally and around the world.

Natural trend or media trend?

So is there a trend towards increasing numbers of disasters? Or is it simply a consequence of 24/7 reporting of these events through the media or social media?

This is the question - I'm not sure we yet have an accurate answer. However, throughout history disasters have always occurred. What is different is that we can now often watch disasters as they occur, watch lists of growing casualties, and be bombarded with tragic images, which are often repeated many times.

This means that disaster can have an effect both to the people and communities where the disaster occurs, but also to people distant from the event. So dealing with disaster may be required for both these groups.

We need to also be aware of media bias. Some events can receive far more coverage than others, so that it can appear to be more significant.

Disaster can come in many forms: drought, wild fire, flood, storm, cyclone, earthquake, and tsunami.

When disaster strikes, “people and their communities world can become turned upside down.” It can be a distressing period with emotional wounds, physical wounds, and economic struggles. Now also people distant from the disaster can see it unfold and also become distressed, and feel a little helpless to the situation as they are distant from the event.

I watched an ABC program on the Victorian Wild fires of 2009 – the resilience of those people who experienced the event and how they helped each other was amazing. As one article reported *“When things like this happen, human beings pull themselves together and they do what they need to do to move on.”*

Part of life

Disasters are a part of life. It is not something one gets over, but rather it's something one works with and moves forward from. It is a place where one can begin to come to terms with “who they are” and one's place in the world. No one wants or wishes on another, struggle, but struggle certainly expands one's sense of who they are, building inner strength and resilience.

There is no magical way of dealing with disaster, as it will be unique to each individual. Every one will need more or less time to heal, in their unique way. However research and experts in the area suggest there are some things,

which may be more helpful.

Healing from disaster

Some KEY things stand out:

"Healing is not something that is going to descend upon us from heaven. It is something that we are going to have to FIGHT for... The fight begins when we can muster up the courage to start over, to pick up the pieces and rebuild that in which tragedy has shattered." Rabbi Naomi Levy

- Support – those more likely to be traumatised by an event lack sufficient community or support in some way.
 - Stay connected and aware
 - Help others
 - Accept help
 - Utilise social media in a positive way
- Reduce one's media exposure to the event. Limit time dwelling on the event, but rather focus on positive aspects of moving forward. Over exposure to the event or talking about it can increase the stress and traumatic effects. As Radhika and I decided 20 years ago: going to bed soon after watching the news is not a healthy way to sleep. Too much exposure to disaster is also not healthy.
- Attempt to get back to a normal routine ASAP – do something, stay busy, but avoid hasty decisions. Eat regularly, even if not hungry.
- Calm yourself
 - Yoga (and there is research to support this - Studies have shown that one month after a disaster event, after physical needs are met, that emotional scars can remain, and that yoga can be helpful. One week of yoga was enough to make positive changes.)
 - Breathing and relaxing
 - Exercise
 - Calming messages to your self
- Focus on hope and the positive

When faced with a choice of fearing the worst or hoping for the best, always choose the latter. Martin Rossman, M.D.

- Self /Community efficacy - you/we can do it
- "Due to circumstances beyond our control, we are masters of our fates and captains of our souls." Ashleigh Brilliant

When you watch disaster unfold from a distance:

"Avoid getting stuck in front of the TV. You have to balance what you're taking in. It's also important to combat feelings of helplessness by concentrating on what you can do - making a donation or helping with a fundraising activity can alleviate some of the guilt we feel for not being caught up in the disaster." Dr Ellen

Plan for the future

Though we do not wish for disaster, wisdom would suggest that we should all

plan for future disaster.

Keep it simple:

- Determine what is your risk – your local council can help
- Plan what you and your family would need and do in such an event, and remember also your pets
- Review it regularly

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