



Guidebook for

WELLBEING IN RECOVERY



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INTRODUCTION

In Canada, emergencies and disasters ranging from individual house fires, health emergencies, power outages and floods to wildfires and hurricanes can occur, and in the most extreme cases, cause significant and widespread disruption to routines, social supports, etc. Individuals, families, and communities can be impacted with little warning, causing a great deal of heartache and suffering.

When affected by an emergency, a person may experience a range of thoughts, feelings and behaviour that can be intense, confusing and frightening. These are expected reactions to an extraordinary situation.

Most people recover after emergencies by drawing on their own resources, capacities, strengths and the support of others; most will gradually rebuild their lives and achieve a sense of wellbeing again. Some people will continue to feel overwhelmed, be unable to shake the feelings of despair or have signs of more serious psychological problems. It's important to know the difference between an expected reaction to a stressful or potentially traumatic event and the signs that indicate you should seek additional assistance.

This booklet is for adults and is designed to help you understand the reactions you – or someone you know – may be experiencing.

It contains practical advice, numbers to call and websites to visit if you need extra information or support.

Following an emergency, it's important to remember that you are not alone and that help is available.



EXPECTED REACTIONS TO AN EXTRAORDINARY EVENT

When a person experiences a stressful or traumatic event such as an emergency, it can have a profound impact on the person's psychological wellbeing. People may experience many different emotional and physical reactions which can vary in severity depending on their personal situation and the degree of loss the person may have experienced.

Common reactions experienced during and following a major or prolonged emergency can include:

- feelings of fear, sadness or anger;
- feeling overwhelmed;
- feeling numb, detached or withdrawn;
- difficulty with focusing attention and concentration;
- difficulty planning ahead;
- tearfulness;
- unwanted and recurring memories or bad dreams related to the event;
- sleep problems
- constant questioning – “What if I had done x, y or z, instead?” and “What will happen now?”
- ‘replaying’ the event and inventing different outcomes in order to be prepared should it happen again.

Some people also react by not feeling anything at all, by having difficulties in making decisions or by isolating themselves from others. Some people increase their intake of alcohol or other substances to escape the pain they are feeling.

These reactions can be quite strong and are often at their worst early on in the emergency. In most cases, they fade over the following weeks, although the person may experience them from time to time for a much longer period. However, if at any time these reactions seriously affect a person's ability to participate in day-to-day activities at home or once back at work, it's important to discuss it with a health professional.

Guilt

An emergency can result in loss which leaves some people with feelings of guilt. Guilt can be common after disasters and health emergencies and can become a problem if these feelings are extreme or prolonged. Guilt can also get in the way of asking for help (e.g., “Others need it more than I do”).

DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF EMERGENCIES

Following an emergency, it's important to find ways to regain a sense of safety and control. People often need to have access to a safe and secure environment, to find out what happened to family members and friends and to have access to relevant services. There are steps you can take to make the situation more manageable for you and your loved ones.

Helping yourself

→ **Spend time connecting with family and friends.**

Spending time connecting with close friends and loved ones is critical following an emergency, whether you're able to do so in person or virtually. Ensure that you have regular contact with people whom you trust and who support you. Ask for practical help and support when you need it – people often want to help and appreciate knowing what you need.

→ **Try to get back to a routine.**

This is very important, particularly if you have children. It can be hard at first because life may be chaotic, but try to think of ways you can re-establish a routine as soon as possible – for example, eat at the same time you would normally eat each day.

→ **Try to be healthy.**

Although your life might be disrupted right now, do what you can to eat a balanced diet and get some regular exercise – go for a walk! Evidence shows regular exercise can improve one's mood. Looking after your body will help you gain the strength you will need to get through this challenging time. Also, try to balance exercise with regular rest, relaxation and adequate sleep.

→ **Take time out.**

Do things that you enjoy and find a new enjoyable activity if needed. This sounds simple, but often after an emergency enjoyable activities become low priority. It's important, despite it all, to take part in enjoyable activities. You may find it useful to use the worksheet at the back of this booklet to help plan some enjoyable activities.

→ **Limit the amount of media coverage you watch, listen to, or read.**

While getting information is important, watching or listening to news bulletins too frequently can cause distress.

→ **Write down your worries.**

You may find it helpful to write down your worries and concerns and use the problem-solving worksheet at the back of this booklet to identify some practical steps you can take to address those issues. Identify the specific feelings you are experiencing and the concern/worry that may be underlying each of these feelings.

→ **Express your feelings.**

For some people, writing about their experience can be helpful, particularly if they find it difficult to talk about it. Although some distress is normal during this process, if you find writing down your experience too distressing or overwhelming, don't continue. There are many other ways to express your feelings that you may find helpful, such as drawing, painting, playing music, making collages etc.

→ **Accept help when it's offered.**

When emergencies occur, they often affect people who have never before had a reason to access government or crisis support services. Getting help can be uncomfortable for some people who are not used to asking for or accepting assistance. However, there is no reason not to accept the kindness of others now – you would help them if the situation was reversed.

→ **Don't expect to have the answers.**

When something unexpected happens, there are no guarantees about how the future will turn out. It is normal to feel unsure and confused.

→ **Connect with others.**

Grief, loss and shock, sadness and stress, can make you feel like isolating yourself from others. It may be helpful to remember that many people are feeling the same as you and will share your journey of recovery. Shutting yourself off from others is unlikely to make the situation any better.

→ **Have a plan for anniversaries or other triggering events, like holidays.**

Throughout the year, anniversaries and holidays may trigger strong emotional responses, especially if media coverage is significant. You may find these periods of time difficult, so it can be helpful to have a plan. Limit your exposure to media coverage, schedule moments with relaxing and enjoyable activities, and make sure you have people to support you.

→ **Plan for the future.**

Emergencies will happen. When you are ready, you can use your experience to be more prepared should you ever be involved in an emergency again. The Red Cross has useful information available at www.redcross.ca to help you prepare. You can also make a plan with Public Safety Canada's *Get Prepared step-by-step online guide*. Available online www.getprepared.gc.ca/

There may be a temptation to cope with trauma after an emergency by engaging in unhelpful activities that are likely to get in the way of your recovery from the event.

→ **Using alcohol or other substances to cope**

Although these may make you feel better in the short term, overuse or prolonged use of alcohol or drugs can cause serious problems for you and your loved ones.

→ **Keeping yourself busy and working too much**

Keeping busy is good up to a point, but throwing yourself into work or other activities as a way of avoiding painful feelings can be unhelpful in the long term.

→ **Engaging in stressful family or work situations**

Sometimes these are hard to avoid, but, whenever possible, try to reduce stressful interactions between you, your loved ones and friends.

→ **Withdrawing from family and friends**

It's okay to allow yourself some time on your own if you need it, but try not to spend too much time alone.

→ **Stopping yourself from doing things that you enjoy**

Sometimes, after emergencies, people feel they should not enjoy themselves in the midst of so much suffering. That doesn't help anyone – it's good for you and others to try to participate regularly in enjoyable, and sometimes adapted, activities.

→ **Avoid talking about what happened**

Not everyone is ready to talk at the same time, but most people find that it's very helpful to talk to someone they can trust about what happened and how they are coping.

→ **Taking risks or making major life decisions**

Often, after experiencing an emergency or trauma, people take unnecessary risks or make significant decisions about relationships, accommodation or work. This is not a good time to be making those decisions – take your time.

WHEN THE REACTION OR DISTRESS DOESN'T SETTLE

While it is normal for people who have experienced an emergency to go through a range of emotional reactions, for some people the distress persists and they may be at risk of developing a mental health problem, such as:

- depression
- prolonged or complicated grief
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- other anxiety disorders
- problems with alcohol and/or drugs.

People who have experienced deeply upsetting things, may take a long time to adjust to these changes and regain a sense of normality.

There are signs to look for in yourself and in others to indicate that what you are experiencing may be beyond a normal reaction.

Warning signs

If you or someone you know experiences any of the following symptoms at any time, seek professional help:

- If the distress feels extreme or interferes with the person's ability to participate in day-to-day activities
- Feeling overwhelming fear for no obvious reason
- Panic symptoms: increased heart rate, breathlessness, shakiness, dizziness and a sudden urge to go to the toilet
- Avoiding things that bring back memories of what happened to the point where day-to-day tasks cannot be carried out
- Excessive guilt about things that were or weren't said or done
- Loss of hope or interest in the future
- Thoughts of ending one's life or self-harming.

As a general rule, it's a good idea to seek help if you think that you are not coping. You should speak to a health professional if:

- your problems seem too severe
- the emotional reactions are lasting too long
- you're finding it difficult to engage in day-to-day activities or get along with family and friends.

Many people find that one or more visits to a counsellor, spiritual leader, health professional or psychologist greatly assists their recovery. Making the decision to access professional assistance if you need it is a wise choice that can often help you to regain emotional strength and resilience.



HOW FAMILY AND FRIENDS CAN HELP

→ **Give them a break.**

Recognise that the person has just been through an extremely stressful event. He/she will need time and space to acknowledge the extent of the losses. You can help by doing practical things, like picking up groceries, etc. It's important to remember that people may need support from friends and family members for a considerable amount of time.

→ **Be sensitive.**

If people have escaped with minimal damage to their property and/or health, it's not helpful to say: "Well, at least you still have your house/life/health." They have been through a distressing event and it may make the person feel worse to be singled out as "the lucky one" when friends and neighbours have suffered greater losses.

→ **Choose your news.**

It can be tempting to obsess over news coverage, but too much exposure can be upsetting – particularly for teenagers and children. If the images are distressing the person, turn the TV off and do something else.

→ **Talk it through.**

Try not to gloss over or downplay what happened and do not discourage the person from talking about what they have been through. Offer the person a shoulder to cry on and a sympathetic ear. On the flip-side, it's also important not to press the person to remember or describe the event, or talk about feelings if he/she isn't ready. Sometimes, people say things that are meant to be helpful, but instead the comments just leave the person feeling more isolated and misunderstood. For example, it's not helpful to say: "You just need to get on with your life" or "I know how you feel."

→ **Get help.**

If the symptoms are persisting or causing significant distress, encourage the person to seek extra support from others, such as your health professional, spiritual leaders, psychologists, social workers, support organizations and/or mental health organizations.

→ **Keep it simple.**

Remember that providing support doesn't have to be complicated. It often involves simple gestures connecting, including virtually, to play games, laugh, or share a meal.

→ **Take care of yourself.**

It can be very trying looking after someone else and sometimes, we forget to look after ourselves. Be aware of your own health – physical and mental. If you're feeling run down or stressed, talk to a doctor and seek support from others.

THE SILVER LINING

It may help to know that the vast majority of people going through emergencies recover by drawing on personal strengths and the love and support of family members, friends, neighbours and the wider community. Often, we can see adaptive coping and other positive outcomes from these experiences. Many people who have lived through an emergency develop new skills and view themselves and their families in a more positive light, place less importance on material possessions, develop closer bonds with their community and feel a sense of pride in their recovery.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Canadian Mental Health Association: For links to support and resources in your area.

Canadian Psychological Association: For links to important information and psychologists in your area.

Canadian Association of Social Workers: To find a social worker in your area.
1-855-729-CASW (2279)

Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association: To find a certified (registered) counsellor in your area.

2-1-1: Call 211 for community-based health and social services.

Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868

Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention: For links to crisis centres in your province or territory.

First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line: 1-855-242-3310

Public Health Agency of Canada: For additional supportive resources and links to your provincial and territorial health ministry.

Public Safety Canada: For more information and links to provincial and territorial emergency management.

WORKSHEET 1: CHOOSING ENJOYABLE ACTIVITIES

After an emergency, people often stop doing things that used to be enjoyable, rewarding or personally meaningful. It's hard to remember to take time for yourself, but taking the time to engage in pleasant activities is important.

There are so many tasks people must carry out following an emergency. Trying to take care of all the details while you may be coping with difficult feelings can quickly drain your emotional and physical energy. By taking care of yourself, eventually you will not only feel better, you will be able to do all of those day-to-day things that must be done.

Some activities to consider, as allowed:

INDOOR ACTIVITIES	OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES	SOCIAL ACTIVITIES (VIRTUAL OR IN-PERSON)	COMMUNITY REBUILDING ACTIVITIES
Reading	Going for a walk	Calling a friend	Fixing up a park, playground
Drawing/painting	Playing a sport	Lunch with a friend	Doing something as a tribute
Listening to music	Visiting a park	Contacting family	Cleaning a neighbour's yard
Watching a movie	Walking a dog	Meeting new people	Helping in a fundraiser
Writing in a journal	Gardening	Learning a new hobby	Minding a friend's children
Computer time (games, internet)	Swimming	Emailing, texting, blogging, chatting online	Helping to repair a community building

This list is intended to give you ideas about things that you might enjoy doing. You do not need to stick to the things on the list. Take some time to pick some activities you want to try or consider a few that are not included on this list. It's helpful to pick at least one activity you can do by yourself or with someone else, virtually or in person, depending on the guidance of public authorities. Think about activities that you have enjoyed or found meaningful in the past.

STEP 1: REVIEW THE ACTIVITY LIST

- Create a list of at least five activities that you want to try. Think about some of the things that worked in the past to make you feel better.

STEP 2: PICK AN ACTIVITY TO DO

- You may pick more than one, but at least pick one. Find a day and a time when you can engage in this activity over the next week. Write it in on the calendar below.

MONDAY	
TUESDAY	
WEDNESDAY	
THURSDAY	
FRIDAY	
SATURDAY	
SUNDAY	

STEP 3: MAKE A PLAN

Take a few minutes to think about what you need to do to make sure that you will be able to do the activity that you have chosen. Review the questions below and make them part of your plan.

- Do you want or need to ask someone to do this activity with you? Is it something you can do virtually?
- Do you need anything to help you do this activity (e.g. sports equipment)?
- How will you handle any feelings you might have that may make it difficult for you to engage in the activity? (Some of these feelings might include grief or loss, lack of energy, or guilt about doing an enjoyable activity when there are other important tasks you need to complete.)

WORKSHEET 2: PROBLEM SOLVING

This worksheet will help you to break down problems into more manageable pieces, help you to prioritise problems and decide the best action to take.

STEP 1: DEFINE THE PROBLEM

→ What is the problem I want to work on first?

If you need to narrow down which problem to focus on first, it can help to ask yourself:

- Which problem is really bothering me the most?
- Is there one that I really need to deal with sooner than the others?
- Is there one that is getting worse? Is there a problem that I feel most comfortable working on first?

→ Take a minute to ask yourself these questions about the problem:

- | | |
|---|----------|
| a. Is it happening to me/Is it between me and someone else? | yes / no |
| b. Is it happening to someone else? | yes / no |
| c. Is it happening between two or more other people? | yes / no |

(If you circled 'yes' to a, this is likely to be a good problem for you to work on. If you circled 'yes' to b or c, this may not be a problem that you can fix. This may be a situation for someone else to work on.)

STEP 2: SET THE GOAL

→ What do I hope to see happen if the problem gets resolved?

→ What would a successful outcome to this problem look like to me?

Sometimes, a problem can be too big to tackle all at once. Ask yourself:

→ What pieces or steps could I break the problem into to make it more manageable?

STEP 3: **BRAINSTORMING**

→ What are some possible solutions to the problem?

(Don't judge your ideas. Write down any solution that comes to mind, even those solutions that may not have worked in the past or that sound unrealistic).

STEP 4: **EVALUATE AND CHOOSE THE BEST SOLUTIONS**

→ What are the best solutions from your brainstorming list?

It may be helpful to ask the opinion of someone you trust.

STEP 5: **MAKE IT HAPPEN**

→ Which action steps will I commit to in the next several days?

THE CANADIAN RED CROSS SOCIETY

Visit redcross.ca for more information on how to contact your local Red Cross office.

