



Sleeping Better in the Wake of Disaster

Among the most common reactions people experience after a disaster are problems with getting their usual sleep. This can happen for many reasons, including the effect that grieving and heightened levels of anxiety have on your mind and body; the uncertainty of the unfolding situation; and having to sleep in an unfamiliar or uncomfortable place.

Amid the aftermath of disaster, you may not be able to “turn it off” and sleep like usual. You may find that you cannot do so or even will not do so. The latter is especially the case among disaster responders, who readily feel pressure from others or themselves to perform with little or no sleep.

Understanding the Problem

Stresses of all kinds, including disasters, can lead to the following types of sleep disturbance in *adults*:

- Having a hard time falling asleep.
- Waking up often or for longer periods of time during the night.
- Being able to sleep only for a short period of time.
- Not feeling well rested after sleeping.
- Nightmares
- Less commonly, sleeping too much.

In *children*, sleep disturbances from disaster are age dependent but can include:

- Bedwetting
- Nightmares
- Screaming during sleep
- Being unable to sleep alone

Sometimes sleep disturbance represents an isolated response to stress. And, for many people the problem can resolve within a few days. But, the longer it lasts, the more you should be concerned about it. The more it is associated with other persistent problems, like sadness, loss of motivation, loss of energy or appetite, or hopelessness, the more you should be concerned that it may be symptomatic of a post-disaster mental health problem such as Major Depression or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Managing the Problem

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There are a number of ways you can address disaster related sleep problems:

- Remind yourself that your sleep is important, even if you feel overwhelmed by everything you need to do to recover from the event.
- If particular thoughts and concerns are on your mind when you lie awake at night, plan to deal with them the next day. Problems usually seem larger at night and rarely get solved then. Some people keep a “worry log” next to their bed to record problems for addressing the next morning.
- Try to re-establish your usual daily routine as much as possible.
- If you are sleeping in a new place, take the time to make it as comfortable and familiar as possible.
- Take some time to for leisure or exercise during the day, even if this feels out of place. Be sure not to exercise too close to your intended bedtime.
- Make sure your alcohol or caffeine intake has not increased since the disaster. Alcohol and caffeine, even in moderate doses, can have a negative effect on the quantity and quality of sleep.
- Consult a health or mental health professional if:
 - ❖ It feels like your sleep problem has gone on too long and especially if it lasts more than a few days in a row.
 - ❖ You want to consider a short course of sleep medications, which can be very helpful to getting your sleep back on track.
 - ❖ Your sleep problem occurs along with other symptoms, like persistent sadness or anxiety.
 - ❖ There is concern that you may have Major Depression, PTSD, or another condition.

If your child is experiencing sleep problems, many of these recommendations can be applied to them. For example, if they are used to a bedtime ritual such as story-telling, be sure that this gets minimally disrupted after a disaster. Additionally,

- Your children may require you to co-sleep with them, especially if you are now sleeping in an unfamiliar place.
- You should accept that they may be more anxious or needy at this time and respond accordingly.
- Depending upon their age, ask them if they have fears around sleep and brainstorm ways to address them.
- Be sure you are taking care of your own emotional well-being. More so than usual, your children’s state of mind will reflect that of yours.
- If the sleep problems persist or you have any questions about it, consult a pediatrician or mental health professional.

References

Information in this handout was adapted from some of the following sources, which you may find helpful:

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Facts for Families, Helping Children after Disaster, <http://www.aacap.org/page.wv?section=Facts+for+Families&name=Helping+Children+After+A+Disaster>, downloaded 6/7/08

National Academy of Sleep Medicine Adjustment Insomnia, <http://www.sleepeducation.com/Disorder.aspx?id=15>, downloaded 6/1/08

Tips for Survivors of a Traumatic Event—Managing Your Stress, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration, NMH 05-0209, 4/07

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