



Your Leading Mental Health Resource

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Coping With Disaster

Tips for College Students

In the aftermath of the tragedies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University students from across the country may feel uncertain about their own safety or that of their friends and family.

Whether you have been directly or indirectly impacted, it is important to know that each person reacts differently to disaster, and it is normal and expected to experience a range of responses. Emotional responses can appear immediately or sometimes develop months later. Those students who live away from home may have a more difficult time coping without the reassurance of family nearby.

But understanding what you're feeling and taking positive steps to address those feelings can help you cope. Below is a list of common responses to be aware of, and the next page offers practical tips on how to deal with your reactions and a list of resources. Remember that things may never be quite the same, but they will get better, and you will feel better.

Some Common Responses to Disaster and its Consequences:

- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation; difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Inability to focus on schoolwork and extracurricular activities
- Apathy and emotional numbing
- Irritability and anger
- Extreme mood swings
- Sadness and depression
- Feelings of powerlessness
- Extreme changes in eating patterns; loss of appetite or overeating
- Crying for "no apparent reason"
- Headaches and stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Excessive use of alcohol and drugs

Most of these reactions will decrease as time passes and you begin to resume your daily activities. Because everyone experiences stress differently, don't compare your progress with other people or judge their reactions and emotions.

Tips for Coping and Returning to Daily Lives

- **Talk about it** and encourage others to share their perspectives. Sharing your feelings with friends, professors, classmates and family will help you work through what happened. Talking with others will relieve stress and help you realize that other people have similar feelings.
- **Take care of yourself.** Get plenty of rest and exercise. Do things that you find relaxing and soothing. Remember to eat nutritious foods. Limit your exposure to media reports and images of the disaster, excessive drinking and risk-taking activities. As soon as you feel comfortable, go back to usual routines.
- **Stay connected** to friends and family. Make plans to visit family or other people who can offer reassurance. If you can't be with them in person, increase your contact through phone calls and e-mails.
- **Do something positive** that will help you gain a greater sense of control (for example, give blood, take a first aid class, or donate food or clothing). Get involved with campus activities planned in response to the disaster, such as a candlelight vigil, benefit, discussion group or special lecture.
- **Ask for help** if you feel overwhelmed by lingering thoughts about the disaster—it's not a sign of weakness. Talk with a trusted friend, family member or faith leader. Use on-campus resources such as the college counseling center and health center.

If you have strong feelings that won't go away or if you are troubled for longer than four to six weeks, you may want to seek professional help. Being unable to manage your responses to the disaster and resume your regular activities may be symptoms of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder. People who have existing mental health problems and those who have survived past trauma may also want to check in with a mental health care professional. Help is available; you don't have to deal with this alone.

For supportive listening services, call the Montgomery County Hotline at (301) 738-2255.

For immediate response to crisis situations, call the Montgomery County Crisis Center at (240) 777-4000.

For general information or related fact sheets, call the Mental Health Association at (301) 424-0656 or visit www.mhamc.org.

For additional information, visit the following Web sites:

American College Counseling Association	www.collegecounseling.org
American College Health Association	www.acha.org
American College Personnel Association	www.acpa.nche.edu
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention	www.afsp.org
Anxiety Disorders Association of America	www.adaa.org
Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention, Inc.	www.edap.org
Mental Health Association of Montgomery County	www.mhamc.org
National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information	www.health.org
National Institute of Mental Health	www.nimh.nih.gov
National Panhellenic Conference	www.npcwomen.org
The BACCHUS and GAMMA Peer Education Network	www.bacchusgamma.org