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Become a Survivor: How to Find Peace of Mind Following Life's Traumas

by Dr. V. Alex Kehayan and Dr. Joseph C. Napoli

In the United States, about 51% of women and 61% of men will experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetime, be it domestic violence, fires, motor vehicle accidents, natural disasters, or terrorism. In the aftermath of tragedy, we must all learn how to be more resilient "take charge" survivors.

Attitude is vital to recovery. How one views a situation influences emotional and physical reactions. Although a catastrophe is often a shocking experience, it is imperative to put a crisis into perspective. When there is no control over what the environment offers, the only alternative is to adapt to the situation with as much flexibility as possible. This is not easy, but most great leaders rise to the occasion in adversity. Winston Churchill once said, "Move quickly through a crisis." Just imagine how your hero/role model might deal with such a trauma.

Cultivating a sense of humor can help in building confidence. Other methods include spiritual support through prayer, meditation, or the power of positive thought. Above and beyond these personal response styles, it is always important to draw strength from others. Support systems are critical to survival. Social support is essential to healthy functioning and successful recovery after a disaster.

Everyone deals with life's turmoil differently. To avoid becoming a victim of a catastrophe, choose a coping strategy that will work best with your own personal style.

Things to do over time: The following actions and strategies aid the healing process in the aftermath of a disaster:

1. Avoid major life decisions that can be dealt with later. For example, if your home was destroyed in a fire, focus on the immediate response, such as contacting your insurance carrier, rather than worry about long-term living arrangements.
2. Make a plan: What is your goal? What do you need to achieve it? Who can help? Prioritize what needs to be done 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.
3. Fill your life with music and art. These creative gifts provide "food



for the soul."

4. If you are religious, celebrate gratitude for blessings through prayer.
5. Take breaks or quiet moments. Go to the movies or do some light reading.
6. Eat pure foods and drink plenty of water. Avoid self-medication, alcohol, and drugs.
7. Stay in touch with friends and family. Communicate and reach out for support.
8. Pets can provide easy comfort. Play with pets, adopt one, or volunteer at an animal shelter.
9. Find something to laugh about each day.
10. Let go of emotional baggage from the past and forgive others.
11. Take walks, exercise, or meditate to reflect on the positive aspects of life.

Try this relaxation/meditation technique:

Progressive Relaxation: Tighten muscle groups one section at a time. Then, take a deep breath. Release the tightness in each muscle group during the exhale breath.

Arms: Clench hands, tense biceps and triceps, tighten your elbows, then release

Legs: Tighten your buttocks, push down on your heels, tighten leg muscles, then release

Head: Clench jaw, furrow eyebrows, then release

Thoughts and attitudes: A healthy outlook on life makes full recovery more achievable.

1. Challenge negative beliefs. Replace such thoughts as, "I always have bad luck...nothing will better from now on...everything is going wrong," with, "Is there any real reason to think that...maybe things will change for the better."
2. Adjust self-talk. Convert negative messages into positive ones, for example, replace "I'll never get through this," with "I can do this, but it's okay to feel scared."
3. Use previous ordeals that have been successfully overcome as a "power base."
4. Consider alternative outcomes for worst-case scenarios, for example, "I can still see my friends, I can enjoy the little things in life."
5. Imagine how this event will be viewed in the future, remembering how things do change over time.

Seeking Professional Help

Remember that there are many situations when you should seek further help. If you have medical symptoms, call a licensed physician. If you experience acute medical symptoms or have been exposed to a toxic substance, seek emergency medical services by calling 911. For a variety of other symptoms, such as acute stress, sleep disturbances, suicidal thoughts, and/or extreme anxiety or panic, seek help from a physician,

psychiatrists, or mental health professional. Use other resources such as FEMA, insurance carriers, disaster relief organizations, and licensed financial advisors to address financial and/or technical needs.

No one is exempt from terrorist attacks or other disasters. Since September 11, 2001, Americans have a greater awareness of their vulnerability, not only to terrorist attacks but also to natural disasters, new disease outbreaks, and industrial and transportation disasters. Few get through life without enduring some ordeal, crisis, or traumatic event. We can either let fear dominate our lives, live in denial about these constant threats, or prepare to meet these challenges.

How do we manage our fears? How can we survive? How do we prepare to protect ourselves and others? How do we recover? Where do we get help? How do we help ourselves? What about caring for our children and others? Bottom line --- How do we "bounce back" in the face of disaster and terrorism?

Drs. Kehayan and Napoli, Co-Directors of Resiliency LLC, a partnership for crisis and disaster consultation and training, have designed and taught courses on disaster mental health and have participated in the planning and execution of numerous disaster exercises. Together, as volunteer crisis counselors, they aided employees of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and officers of the Port Authority Police Department in the aftermath of 9/11. Several years after the tragic event, they were inspired to write ***Resiliency in the Face of Disaster and Terrorism: 10 Things to Do to Survive*** (Personhood Press, October 2005, \$14.95), a guide on how to prevent, react to, and cope with disasters in the home and in the world.

Resiliency LLC: <http://www.resiliency.us> - Enhancing Your Resilience in a Dangerous World

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