

After Disaster: Helping With Personal Recovery

By Paula Yardley Griffin

We at Consulting Today are stunned and saddened by the recent horrific attacks on the American people. To provide our readers with some practical assistance, we searched for advice on ways to assist those who were affected by the tragedies — victims, their families, co-workers and friends, recovery workers and others — helping them move through the stress that often results from traumatic events.

We have listed here some of the actions that were recommended, and a few resources.

For consistency, we have directed the advice to the person who is dealing with the tragedy. We anticipate that in most cases, a consultant, counselor, coach, manager, or other facilitator will be working with individuals and groups to help them through the healing process.

Most of these exercises are appropriate for writing, personal reflection, and/or group discussion. As you work with an individual or group, you can select and customize appropriate exercises. Each session with a support group might include some debriefing and discussion, and one or two exercises.

The literature emphasized that *this process takes time* — weeks, months, or even years depending on the enormity of the disaster, the individual's resilience and history, and the resources available.

Activities to Help With Personal Recovery After A Disaster

Getting Through. Early activities emphasize clarifying what happened and what it means, moving past denial and “all is lost” responses. Company and comfort are important components.

Activities that can help in the early stages after a tragedy:

1. Talk to people about what happened. Find people who understand, perhaps because they've been through this or something like it. Get a support group. Do some of these activities together.
2. *Acknowledge what you've lost. Describe the most significant things you've lost, and the burdens you now have.*
3. Allow yourself to feel the pain. It hurts. A lot. Describe what you are feeling in a journal or some other way that helps for you.
4. *Tell the story of what happened. Write how it all began.*
5. Seek comfort. List the names and contact information for people who are available to comfort you, and protect you, and keep the list handy.
6. *Take part in ceremonies or meetings. Go to church, to meetings, to vigils, anything that helps you be in touch with your feelings around people who understand.*

7. Take time every day to help yourself. Meditate. Pray. Talk to people. Rest.

Allowing Time. These activities emphasize enabling the healing process by managing emotions, engaging in healthy activities and beginning the process toward hope.

Activities that can help in this stage:

1. The healing process takes time. List things you could possibly do to occupy your mind while the process continues underneath. Include getting plenty of rest.
2. *Recognize the process of recovery. Talk to people about how it progresses. Write about another time you had a loss and how you recovered.*
3. Learn more. Ask around to find others who have been in similar circumstances. Research how others who have had similar situations have dealt with it.
4. *Take stock of what you haven't lost. You're still alive. You are still you. What else do you still have? Who is important to you? To whom are you important?*
5. If you're having feelings of guilt, which is common, write down all the issues, so you can look at them. Don't dwell on “if onlys.”
6. *Anger is a natural part of the process. List the reasons for your anger, and talk it over with someone, rather than turning it on yourself or anyone else.*
7. Consider the positive side of yourself. What are your accomplishments so far in life? What are your strengths?
8. *When you have flashes of memory that make you sad or fearful, accept that those incidents will happen. Talk to your friends and support group about ways to dispel the feelings when they come. Walking or exercise are often helpful.*
9. Avoid unnecessary decisions. Don't rush to make any changes while you are still working through this. List the things that must be done, and discuss it with people before you rush into anything.
10. *Acknowledge progress. Describe how you have already improved in the last days and weeks. List some things you have already overcome.*

Moving On. This section emphasizes understanding the process and your reactions. For most people, the process is some version of first shock and denial; then anger and bargaining, moving to acceptance and depression; and finally exploration, action, and commitment.


Activities that can help in this stage:

1. Identify a space that is yours — it can be a solace and a place to “go” when you need time alone. It could

Continued on next page

After Disaster, continued

Continued from previous page

- be as small as a journal or a box for your possessions or a section of your living space.
2. *Think about the process of recovering from loss — the stages of grief people go through, which are similar whether the loss is a loved one, a way of life, a part of you or a part of a city. In your journal, track where you are that process. Don't rush it.*
3. Find ways to be with friends frequently. List possible activities you could be involved in with friends over the next few months.
4. *Enjoy the process of helping something grow. Plant a pot of flowers or a garden. Get involved with animals. Get a new pet yourself, or help with strays.*
5. Reaffirm your beliefs. Talk to others about faith — yours or theirs. Write about times that beliefs or practices have helped you find inner peace or strength.
6. *Continue to be patient with yourself. Emotions are likely on a roller-coaster during this time, possibly including fatigue, sleeplessness, feelings of wanting to die, being unable to concentrate, not caring about anything, depression, irritability, and more. Observe these feelings, write about them, and allow them to pass through.*
7. Accept the help you need. Care for yourself and allow others to care for you. Accept support. Accept protection.
8. *Get some exercise. Rebuild your emotional strength by building your physical strength. Make a list of all the things you could do. Try a few different ones.*
9. Eat healthy. When you're stressed, you need more protein, more of certain vitamins, more calcium. Avoid sugar, caffeine, drugs, alcohol, and nicotine.
10. *Begin to be ready to let go of what you no longer have or need. Consider what you might be hanging on to that you should now let go of, whether it is wishes for the past to come back, or dreams that no longer make sense. Have a ceremony to mark the passage.*
4. *Consider your resources. What sources of help exist? Make as long a list as you can of the possible people and groups who could help you get where you want to go.*
5. Share feelings with others to sort out which fears are just sensible caution given the situation, and which ones will pass as you heal. If you are angry and feel like hitting something, make it a pillow or a football. There has been enough violence.
6. *Spoil yourself a little. List a few things that would make you feel better. Find a way to do some version of those things now and then.*
7. Continue to write in your journal or to track your progress in some other way. Notice what you have accomplished. What is feeling better? What is clearer? What feels more possible?
8. *Consider what additional changes you would like to make in the next few months or year. What would you like to learn? What would you like to do? Put the possibilities out there and allow them to generate energy for you when the time is right.*
9. Be around helpful, positive people as much as you can. List people who are the way you want to be. Care about others, and let them know that you do. Thank those who have helped you.
10. *Remember that progress is a matter of frequency and duration. You will feel better more often and for longer periods as time goes on. Develop plans to help yourself through the tough times — holidays, anniversaries, when a certain sound or smell happens.*
11. Congratulate yourself for your success. Celebrate your life. You are a survivor — stronger, wiser, more confident. You may not be finished, but you are on your way. Congratulations. 

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Building the Future. This section emphasizes searching for options to increase feelings of control and reengage the person with life.

Activities that can help in this stage:

1. Begin to consider your options. What dreams recur from the past? What new possibilities spark your curiosity? Make a big list and don't narrow it down too quickly. Look at everything for a little while.
2. *Consider your personal and physical needs for the next few months? What's important?*
3. Consider what positive results you expect in a few weeks or months. Be realistic but allow for some stretch too. What will it be like when these things have happened? Write about that in great detail.

Resources:

Here are a few resources for helping people rebuild after disasters, where you will find links to many others sites.

- International Society for Traumatic Stress (www.istss.org)
- Grief and Loss Resource Centre, Golden, British Columbia ([grief links](#))
- International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc. (www.icisf.org)
- *Crisis Management Briefings*, George S. Everly
- *A Light In This Dark Valley*, Community Outreach Task Force, International Association of Facilitators. (<http://iaf-world.org>, 952.891.1800.)