

Possible Psychological Reactions to an Earthquake

Anxiety Disorders Unit, CDHB.

We are now a week on from the earthquake and people have been working extremely hard and in often very difficult circumstances. Front line staff have often had to deal with people in considerable distress and provide support for them while continuing to deal with their own issues at home. It is important to identify that we need to recognise our own experiences and responses to the crisis, so we can look after ourselves first and then be better able to deal with the needs of others. Remember the airline's advice to put on your own oxygen mask first before providing assistance to others.

The earthquake and the ongoing aftershocks have had their effects on everyone. It is common to experience the following responses:

- Fatigue and exhaustion particularly as time has gone on.
- Feeling on edge, nervous, and tense.
- Sleep disturbance, insomnia and nightmares.
- Being easily startled and looking out for danger.
- Swings in emotion, including tearfulness, irritability, anger, fear, sadness, grief or feeling numb or detached from self or others.
- Anxiety symptoms like a racing heart, rapid breathing, trembling, loss of appetite and stomach upsets.
- Impaired concentration, decision making and memory which may obviously make us less productive.
- Worrying about what might have been or having to deal with real ongoing concerns.
- Feeling a sense of lack of control.
- Thoughts and memories about the event continuing to pop into your mind, even days or weeks afterwards.
- Increased conflict in our relationships, over-protectiveness or social withdrawal.

Reactions can be triggered by further aftershocks, images (things we read or see), and particularly sounds, smells, or movements (such as shaking or swaying) that remind you of the experience.

Usually, these reactions will dissipate over the following days to weeks as we make sense of what has happened.

It is really important at this point to allow yourself time to work through the experience of the earthquake. There are many different ways of coping. These may include

- Talking to family, friends, neighbours and colleagues.
- Keeping regular sleep patterns (appreciating aftershocks may be disrupting sleep at times).
- Re-establishing usual routines.
- Eating regularly and being mindful of nutrition.
- Keep physically active which helps reduce tension and anxiety.
- Pacing yourself by keeping busy and taking time to relax.

- Remember having more than four to six cups of caffeinated drinks per day may increase your anxiety levels, and interfere with your sleep.
- With alcohol you may find it initially relaxes you, but as the alcohol withdraws from your system, it can increase your anxiety and affect your sleep patterns.

There is no set way of doing this. Whatever feels right for you will work best.

An important concern people will often have is the reaction of children to such events. Now most children are back at school and a sense of normality is returning, a lot of the reactions they may have had may be resolving. Children are very resilient.

However, younger children may still be more clingy, be experiencing bad dreams (not always just about the earthquake), loss of appetite, and may complain of physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches.

Suggestions for supporting children include the following:

- Be supportive and reassuring, your children may need to be held.
- Your child's fears are genuine to them, this may include worries they may be separated from their parents and needing them close. Talk this through with them. Your child may want to re-enact or draw pictures about the earthquake, this is okay.
- Listen to your child's fears and explanations about what happened.
- Explain what you know about the disaster. You may need to do this more than once. It is also important to try not to show excessive anxiety with your response to the earthquake as children will pick up on this.
- Return to some sense of normality, such as playing with friends going back to school.
- Regular routines are important, such as meals and bedtimes.
- If children are demonstrating aggression or anger then use a nurturing but firm approach, pointing out their behaviour is not acceptable.

The earthquake and ongoing aftershocks have been a very frightening experience for everyone. **What most people are experiencing now is a normal response to this extraordinary event.**

Most people will recover from this but it may take weeks or months. Only a very small percentage of people are likely to have ongoing difficulties. If you feel that things are not settling, in the first instance you should contact your GP for advice on how to access appropriate help.