

## SURVIVING THE TSUNAMI

For survivors of the disaster

Written by Atle Dyregrov, PhD.  
Center for Crisis Psychology  
Bergen, Norway  
e-mail: atle@uib.no

Many of you who survived the Tsunami disaster experienced extreme life threat and very strong sensory impressions. Such an event leads to different normal psychological after-reactions. In the following some of the most usual reactions will be described, and some will be given on how to cope with these situations.

### UNREALITY

During or following the event, many people experience a feeling of unreality. It feels unreal, like a dream or like it did not really happen. This shock reaction helps us get through the first time period. Critical incidents often lead to a change in time perception, as if time stand still or rushes. This allows us time to handle the event, make decisions and face the threat. The mental apparatus is mobilized, the senses sharpened, and the situation can be optimally dealt with. However, the price paid for this heightened ability to perceive the environment is that sensory impressions can be "burnt" into one's memory with great detail and intensity. Many get their emotional reactions postponed by the shock, while others show more immediate emotional reactions.

Shortly following the disaster, a variety of reactions may start. Physical reactions, such as shivering, heartbeat, feeling sick, becoming dizzy and feeling cold and hot at the same time, are common. Feeling helpless, overwhelmed, frightened or sad also characterize the emotions shortly after the event.

However, it is often after one has had the time to digest or think about the event, that emotional reactions can occur. Sometimes people think there is something wrong because they reacted too little in the beginning, and it is important to state that one do not have to have emotional reactions to be normal. It is not uncommon that reactions surface when we return home and feel "safe". Usual reactions are:

### INTRUSIVE IMAGES

In the time after the event the strong sensory impressions can return as intrusive images and thoughts. These Impressions can be visual or auditory sensations or memories from what one smelt, touched or tasted. These impressions can return as detailed, memorized

pictures or like a video or film. Flashbacks to the traumatic experiences are one of the most usual after-reactions following critical incidents. Often these images or thoughts occur at bedtime and lead to sleep disturbances. Shortly following the event these memories return without one being able to control them.

## FEAR & ANXIETY

Increased anxiety is another usual reaction following critical incidents. Fear can be triggered by everything that reminds of the event, or it may be felt as a more general anxiety and fear that another disaster will strike the family. The feeling of safety that was present in our life before the event is shattered. The increase in anxiety can be accompanied by a feeling of constant alertness. People may become more jumpy and react to sudden noises or lights. The anxiety can also lead to physical reactions such as bodily tension, digestion problems, etc.

## IRRITABILITY & SELF-REPROACH

Another common reaction is irritability and impatience. Following such an immense disaster sadness and grief will be apparent, even without having lost close persons. Tears may come in unexpected situations. Feelings of self-reproach and guilt may often occur, even when there is no reason to feel this way. "There must have been something I could have done to help ", or "If only ..." are usual thoughts after critical events. Sometimes we start thinking about the short time span between life and death, and become more concerned about our close family.

## LACK OF UNDERSTANDING

Some people experience more tense relations with their family and friends in the first period after a disaster, especially when others return to their normal lives. Some feel that family members or friends do not understand what they have gone through. To avoid this feeling, it is important to share one's experiences with significant others. Then they can better understand and support the affected person, and be available to listen to thoughts, impressions, memories, etc.

## RETURNING TO NORMAL LIFE

It usually takes time to return to ordinary routines after a disaster of this kind. Everything may feel unimportant when compared to what happened. Difficulties regarding concentration and memory may also reduce the work capacity in the days and weeks following the disaster. Comments or obtrusive questioning from others (friends, colleagues) can be very painful, and it may be helpful to mentally prepare for questions and curiosity from others.

The duration and strength of long term reactions vary from person to person. Some do not experience strong reactions while others have intense reactions. For some people reactions are normalised within the first few weeks, while for others it will take a longer period of time to return to ordinary life. Sadness and grief has a long-term perspective.

#### WHEN TO SEEK HELP

If reactions last longer than the first month or increase in intensity over time, contact should be made for individual follow-up. Through professional help such reactions can be worked-through and the risk for disturbing long-term effects prevented or reduced. It should be noticed however, that normal grief reactions following the loss of a loved person have a time course that usually lasts much longer than the first months.

#### POINTS OF ADVICE

Some brief points of advice can be useful:

- Accept your own reactions as normal reactions to an extraordinary event. Do not try to avoid reactions during the first weeks after the disaster. Confront thoughts and impressions to get a better understanding of what happened.
- Try to resume and carry out your ordinary daily routines. Go to work, but remember that your work capacity can be reduced for some time, and that you may feel more tired than usual.
- Make sure that you have somebody to talk to. Talk about what actually happened as well as your thoughts, impressions and reactions during and after the incident. However, if you do not feel for talking and you do not struggle to keep thoughts and feelings at a distance, there is no need to continue to focus on the disaster
- It has proven very helpful to put incidents into words by writing about an event. Not only write about what happened, but also about your innermost thoughts and feelings about the event.
- Be careful in not taking in more coffee, nicotine or sugar than usual, because this adds tension in the nervous system. In this way you can take an active step in helping yourself. Music, rest, physical exercise and relaxation can be used to reduce tension. The use of prayers and religious rituals can also be very helpful.
- If you are bothered by intrusive images or fantasies from what you experienced, you may find it helpful to set aside some time during the day when you actively bring into consciousness these images and then manipulate them in your mind. You can imagine seeing it on a screen and then imagine having a remote control where you press the off-button to take the image(s) away. You can also try to call up the image and then push it further and further away until you cannot see it any more.
- If it is sounds or voices that intrude, imagine hearing it from a radio and then turn down the volume by the use of the volume-button or the on-button.

