

Coping with disaster

Originally developed by Paul Stallard Ph.D, Royal United Hospital, Bath, England. Further developed and adapted for disasters by Atle Dyregrov, Ph.D. Center for Crisis Psychology, Bergen, Norway



Being involved in a disaster can be very frightening and it is not surprising that most children and young people will be upset afterwards. You may notice a number of changes and find that:

- ❖ You can't stop thinking about the disaster
- ❖ Times when it feels like the disaster is happening all over again
- ❖ Difficulty sleeping at nights
- ❖ Bad dreams
- ❖ Become very frightened or upset by things that remind you of the disaster
- ❖ Become very watchful when travelling or family members travel
- ❖ Feel angry or irritable with friends and family
- ❖ Not wanting to think or talk about what happened
- ❖ Be reluctant to go out or be with others

For most people these changes last only a couple of weeks although some children find that the effects of the disaster last longer. If you have lost somebody close sadness and longing for the dead one last much longer than this. If the reactions above continues you may want to try some of these ideas to see if they help.

They don't always work but if you practice enough there will be sometimes when they may make you feel better and more in control.

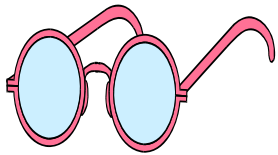
Stopping disaster thoughts



There may be times when you find that you cannot stop thinking about your disaster. Thoughts and memories may keep going round and round in your head like a videotape which you cannot switch off. You may find that this happens more when you are not very busy or if something reminds you about it.

You could try to control your thoughts by teaching yourself to think about something else. Rather than listening to worrying thoughts about the disaster you can try to learn how to switch the videotape off. This can be done in different ways and you will need to experiment to see what works for you.

Describe what you see



Describe to yourself in a lot of detail what is going on around you. Describe what you see as quickly as you can and think about colours, shapes, size, textures, what things are made of, etc. By concentrating on the things you see you stop thinking about the disaster. You will need to practice and remember it probably won't work straight away.

Thinking Puzzles

You may want to squeeze out disaster memories by setting yourself thinking puzzles. This could be done in lots of ways such as

- Counting backwards from 123 in 9s'
- Spelling the names of your family backwards,
- Naming the records of your favourite group
- Naming all the players in your favourite sports team

The puzzles have to be hard enough to challenge you and make you think so don't make them too easy.

Small steps

Sometimes challenges seem too big to tackle in one go. At these times it might be useful to break the task down into smaller steps. Some one who is feeling very frightened about travelling on a plane might for example break this down in to the following steps.



- Sit for a minute in a stationary car
- Sit in a stationary car with the engine running
- Go for a very short ride on a quiet road
- Go for a slightly longer ride on a quiet road
- Go for a short ride on a busier road
- Go for a longer ride

Positive self talk

A useful way of helping yourself through a difficult or worrying situation is by using self-talk. Positive self-talk helps you to feel more relaxed and confident by keeping doubts and worries under control. This involves repeating encouraging and positive messages to yourself at those times when you are feeling very worried or doubt that you will be successful.

Facing your fears



You may find that you become very worried

about things that remind you of your disaster. You may find it difficult to get back in a car or on a cycle or become very fearful when crossing roads. You may find it hard to go past the scene of your disaster or you may become very worried about going out. This is understandable and most people feel like this for a short time after an disaster. For others this feeling becomes very strong and may stop you from doing the things you would really like to do.

- You may give up trying to do things
- Become reluctant to try anything new
- Avoid situations you think will be difficult

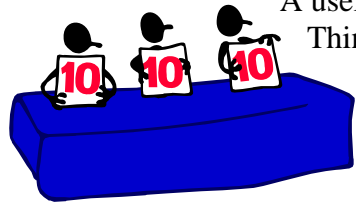
When this happens you need to face your fears and learn to overcome them. The following ideas might help.

Practice being successful



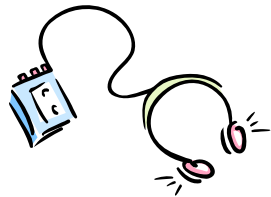
When faced with difficult challenges we often think that we will not be successful. We are very good at predicting failure and thinking that things will go wrong. Thinking like this means that you will feel more anxious and more reluctant to try.

A useful way forward is to conjure up a picture of your challenge in your mind and to talk yourself through what will happen.
Think about the steps



Activities

Some people find that activities are a good way of switching off. The idea is that the activity takes over and drowns out any thoughts or memories about the disaster. When you notice that you are thinking about your disaster try one of the activities you find helpful.



Crosswords, reading, watching the TV/video, listening to the radio or music or whatever you find useful.

The more you concentrate on what you are doing the more you drown out any disaster thoughts

Thought Stopping

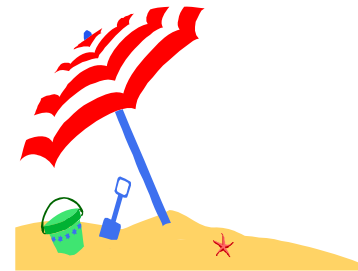
Sometimes you will find that you are only able to stop thinking about your disaster for a short time before the memories start again. At these times thought stopping can be useful. As soon as you notice that you are thinking about your disaster:



Loudly say to yourself **STOP**

Some people find it useful to emphasise this by banging the table or holding a chair or table tightly

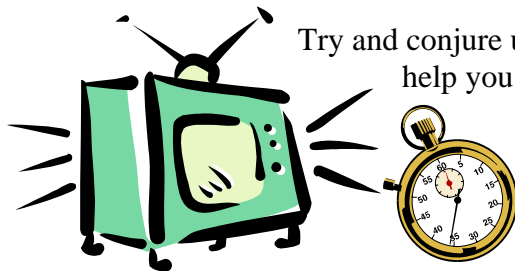
Repeat this and then immediately do something to get yourself busy and your mind occupied.



Keep practising. The more you do it the more you will find it helps.

Turn the video off

People involved in disasters sometimes find that pictures of it keep popping into their minds. It is almost like part of the disaster has been video-taped and is played over and over again. Learning how to turn the video off can be useful.



Try and conjure up a picture of a video player. You may find that looking at your own video player at home can help you get a good picture.

Slowly draw in a deep breath, hold it for 5 seconds and then very slowly let it out. As you breathe out say to yourself “relax” Doing this a few times will help you regain control of your body and help you feel calmer.

Calming Pictures

With this method you make yourself feel more pleasant by thinking about those things you find nice or restful.

Try thinking about your dream place. It could be some where you have been or your fantasy. Conjure up a picture of it in your mind, and make it as restful as possible. Think about the

- Noise of the waves on the beach,
- The wind blowing in the trees.
- The smell of the sea or pine trees.
- The warm sun shining on your face,
- The wind blowing gently in your hair.

Physical Exercise

Some people find that physical exercise is a helpful way to relax. A good run, brisk walk, swim, can help you get rid of any angry or anxious feelings. If physical exercise works for you then use it.

Try these short exercises and see if they help. Remember, you will need to practice before you find them helpful.

Arms and hands: Clench your fists and push your arms straight out in front of you.



Legs and feet: Push your toes downwards and gently raise your legs and stretch them out in front of you.

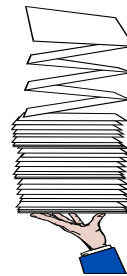
Stomach: Push out your tummy muscles, take a breath and hold it.

Shoulders: Scrunch up your shoulders.

Neck: Push your head back against the chair or bed.

Face: Screw up your face, squeeze your eyes tight and push your lips together

Controlled Breathing



There are times when you may suddenly start to become tense or worked up and won't have time to go through any relaxation exercises. Controlled breathing is a quick method to help you regain control and relax. You can use this method anywhere and often people don't even notice what you are doing!

Concentrate on this, and imagine yourself putting a video in the machine and turning the player on. As you turn it on, the video will start and you will see the pictures of your chosen video. Now imagine yourself turning the video off. Really concentrate on the "off" switch and as you touch the button notice how the video stops. Practice turning the video player in your mind on and off. When the video starts playing pictures from your disaster imagine yourself turning the video off and watch the screen go blank.

Write your worries down

You may have lots of memories about the disaster and see pictures of it time and time again. Some people have a different sort of memory and may feel responsible, guilty, angry or somehow to blame for what happened. These thoughts are very troubling and because no one hears or questions them they tend to stay racing around in your head.

Sometimes it is useful to empty out your head and clear them a way. Seeing them written down on paper can help you to think more clearly and make you feel better.

Write down your disaster worries on a piece of paper.

Think of them all and write them down

Once you have finished, scrunch up your paper tightly and throw them in the bin!

Sleeping

Nighttimes can be particularly difficult as it is often the time when thoughts about the disaster seem to happen most. The more you listen the worse they seem to become and so it is helpful to try and break out of this cycle.

Settling at night

A relaxing nighttime routine may help you to fall asleep easier and give you less chance to think about your disaster. Think about the things that help you relax and see if they can become part of your nighttime routine:

- Have a quiet “wind down” time before going to bed.
- A warm drink or a bath may make you feel relaxed
- A comfortable room (not too hot or cold)
- Leave the light on if it helps
- Put the radio or TV on a timer switch, so they turn off after you fall asleep
- If you find it takes a long time before you fall asleep then try to go to bed later. Staying up later may help you to settle quicker.

Waking at night and bad dreams

Sometimes you may find that you wake in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep again. This is a time when you may be troubled by thoughts about your disaster. The more you listen to them, the worse they will become. Once again it may be useful to try and concentrate on something else:

- Put on your personal stereo and listen to your favourite tape. If you fall asleep the machine will turn itself off.
- Try reading a chapter of a book or a favourite magazine for a few minutes to settle you again.

If this doesn't work then you may want to try and relax.

Learn to relax

Thinking about your disaster or reminders of it may make you feel frightened or worried. Learning to relax might help you to feel better. There are lots of different ways to relax and you will have to find what way works best for you.

Quick Physical Relaxation

By a series of short exercises all the big muscles in your body are tensed for about 5 seconds and then relaxed. You may want to do this at those times you may find most difficult. This could be:

- Before you go to sleep at night
- If you wake up in the night and can't return to sleep
- When you have to go somewhere or do something that might remind you of your disaster
- If you feel wound up.
- I am going to ride on that bus in to town
- I have successfully crossed two roads now only one to go.
-

Repeat your message and praise yourself as you face your challenge

Talk about it

You may find it difficult to talk with other people about your disaster. You may want to try and forget about it. At other times you may feel that people aren't interested in what happened or worry that they will become upset if you talk about how you are feeling. This isn't always helpful and although it might be hard, it is often good to try and talk about your disaster.

Road traffic disasters are very frightening and upsetting events that are often difficult to understand. Talking about it may help you make sense of what happened.

involved and imagine yourself coping and being successful. Make your picture as real as possible and describe your scene in lots of detail. Practising this a few times will help you to recognise that whilst it might be difficult you can be successful.