

Colexio Oficial
de Psicoloxía
de Galicia

SELF-HELP GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUALS AFFECTED BY CRITICAL SITUATIONS

If you or a loved one have recently been affected by a critical situation, this guide can help you understand the reactions that you may have afterwards.

Grupo de Intervención Psicológica en Catástrofes e Emerxencias
(Psychological Disaster and Emergency Response Team, GIPCE)
Colexio Oficial de Psicoloxía de Galicia
(Official Galician Psychologists' Association)

MOST COMMON REACTIONS IN ADULTS



1. PHYSICAL SENSATIONS

- An absence of reaction, not feeling anything.
- A feeling of paralysis or numbness.
- Weariness, fatigue, apathy.
- Nausea and vomiting, headaches.
- Tremors, breathing problems, rapid heartbeat, tachycardia, an increased appetite.
- Concentration and memory problems, disorientation.

3. BEHAVIOURS

- Crying, nervous laughter, sighs.
- An anxious wait or search for the victim.
- Sudden mood swings.
- Avoiding people.
- Sleeping too little or too much, having nightmares or not having a restful sleep.
- Doing nothing or doing many things all the time.
- Irresponsible behaviours: driving very fast, taking too much medicine, too many drugs or drinking too much alcohol...

2. FEELINGS

- Disbelief, insensitivity, denial.
- Irritation, anger, irritability, resentment.
- Distress, anxiety, frustration, guilt.
- Fear, loneliness, helplessness.
- Relief.
- Feeling empty, isolated, desolate.
- Feeling like life is not worth living, not wanting to live anymore...

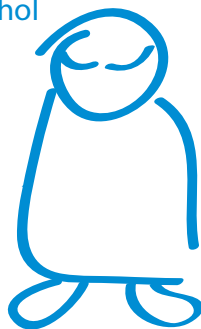
**Do not forget
that your reactions are normal
in an unusual situation like the
one that you are living,
and that not everybody
responds in the same way.**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AFFECTED INDIVIDUALS

WHAT CAN I DO NOW?

- ✓ Share **your feelings** with your family and friends.
- ✓ Ask them for help **if you need it**.
- ✓ Cry if you need to.
- ✓ Let other people be with you.
- ✓ Keep your daily hygiene, sleep and eating routines: **get enough sleep, try to eat something at all meals even though you are not hungry...**
- ✓ Keep yourself active: **do simple everyday tasks, set small goals, plan activities in order of importance, divide your time and have a life as organised as possible.**
- ✓ Deal with things that you can really solve.
- ✓ Avoid self-medication, **taking drugs or drinking alcohol to alleviate your sorrow. This will not change the situation and it can make it even worse.**
- ✓ If you are under regular medical treatment, please contact your health centre.
- ✓ Give yourself time to reflect **before making any important decision in order to see things from a different point of view.**

**Allow yourself
to feel upset**



**Re-establish your everyday
routine gradually**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RELATIVES AND FRIENDS

HOW TO KEEP THEM COMPANY

- ✓ Let them cry, talk, and express their anger, their fury, their guilt...
- ✓ Listen. Avoid asking uncomfortable questions.
- ✓ Do not say anything if you do not know what to say. What they need at this point is being listened to. A hug is sometimes better than any comment.
- ✓ Do not make comments such as "it was better this way", "he/she didn't suffer", "you have to be strong", "don't cry", etc.
- ✓ Do not give them advice on what to do if they do not ask you to.
- ✓ Respect them if they want to be alone.
- ✓ Do not compare their recent experience to a similar one, they will never be the same.

WHAT TO DO

- ✓ Keep in touch with them during the following days: visit them, call them...
- ✓ Offer to help with housework, red tape...
- ✓ Give them privacy.
- ✓ Encourage them to carry on with their everyday routine.



MOST COMMON REACTIONS IN CHILDREN

1. PHYSICAL SENSATIONS

- Physical discomfort: headaches, stomach aches, vague pain difficult to localise...
- Lack of appetite.
- Nervousness.
- Fatigue or lack of energy.

Do not forget that your reactions are normal in an unusual situation like the one that you are living, and that not everybody responds in the same way.

2. FEELINGS

- Fear of separation from their loved ones, fear of strangers, of the dark, of being left alone...
- Embarrassment, guilt, rage, fury, constant anger, aggressiveness.
- Denial ("this can't be happening to me").
- Teenagers may avoid expressing their feelings, e.g. they do not want to cry.
- Children, especially until the age of 7-8, may not have any reaction and they may simply want to play.

3. BEHAVIOURS

- Behaving as if nothing happened.
- Avoiding separation from their loved ones.
- Reverting to "baby" behaviours such as wetting the bed, sucking their finger, jealousy, temper tantrums...
- Problems sleeping or going to bed.
- School problems: refusing to go to school; concentration, performance, behaviour problems...
- Not wanting to be with their peers.
- Not wanting to see or listen to things related to the incident.

Keep in mind that, until the age of six approximately, children do not understand that death means not seeing that person again.

RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING CHILDREN

WHO SHOULD TELL THEM

- The adult with the closest relationship.

HOW TO TELL THEM

- Start with what the child can know.
- Tell them always the truth: avoid lies and explanations such as “he/she’s went to sleep”, “he/she went away”, etc.
- Explain it in terms that the child can understand and with age-appropriate information.
- Answer their questions.
- Tell the child what is happening and what may happen.
- If you think it is necessary, reassure the child that they are in no way to blame for the death.

ATTENDING THE FUNERAL

- If the child wants to say goodbye, and it is possible, allow them to do so in both hospitalisation and death cases.
- Give the child the choice to attend the funeral, this may help them in future. They can attend a funeral with a loved one if they are 7 or older.

Children are especially vulnerable in these situations. How we react before them and what we tell them about the incident will have an influence on how they will cope with the situation.

THEIR EVERYDAY LIFE

- ✓ Talk to the child about their feelings. Do not be afraid to share your own feelings and show your grief.
- ✓ Give the child permission to cry and be sad, and allow yourself to cry and be sad in front of them.
- ✓ Encourage them to express themselves by writing, drawing...
- ✓ If the child asks you to, talk about what happened or about subjects such as "death".
- ✓ Keep in mind that you may have to answer the same questions over and over again. Devote time to the child and be affectionate, especially at bed time.
- ✓ Do not get angry if the child wets the bed or sucks their finger. They will get back to normal gradually.
- ✓ Try to make them re-establish their routines as soon as possible: schedules, responsibilities, going to school, playing...
- ✓ Let them collaborate in activities in which they can feel useful in this situation.
- ✓ Inform the school of the situation.



AFTER THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

- When a loved one dies, we start a **NORMAL PROCESS** thanks to which we will adapt to that loss.
- This process is called **grief**.
- Since people and situations are always different, each grief is unique.
- If you have lost a loved one and you are reading this, you should know that this is a step forward in your own and unique grieving process.

WHAT CAN I FEEL?

- ✓ You can have any of the reactions described in this guide.

WHAT CAN I DO?

- ✓ Follow the recommendations in this guide, they can be useful to you.
- ✓ Go to your health centre or ask for psychological support if you need it.



I WILL KNOW THAT I HAVE GOT OVER IT IF:

I am able to remember without suffering.

I am able to adapt to the new situation.

I focus my energy ON MY LIFE and daily routines.

HOW LONG CAN IT LAST?

The length of your grieving process depends on factors such as your relationship with the deceased, your age, the kind of death, the social and family support you may have, if you are going through other important circumstances in your life (health, work, family...), etc. However, the usual length is between 1 and 3 years.

**Keep in mind that living in the present
does not mean forgetting the past,
and getting over grief does not mean
forgetting about your loved one.**



WHEN SHOULD I ASK FOR HELP?

**If after a reasonable time (4-8 weeks)
the intensity of your reactions
is not lower, it has increased or it makes it
very difficult for you to carry on
with your social or professional life,
or any other important part of your life,
you should seriously consider
the possibility of asking
for both psychological and medical
professional help.**

USEFUL INFORMATION






YOU CAN CONTACT US CALLING



RECOMMENDED WEBSITE

<http://www.vivirlaperdida.com>

READING LIST

-  Ibarrola, Begoña: *Cuentos para el adiós*, ed. SM, 2006.
Stories for explaining death to children of different ages and for different situations.
-  Bucay, Jorge: *El camino de las lágrimas*, ed. Grijalbo, 2001.
-  Kubler Ross, Elisabeth: *La muerte: un amanecer* ed. Luciérnaga, 2008.

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