



The New Zealand Psychological Society

Te Rōpū Mātai Hinengaro o Aotearoa

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Attention: Science, Health and Social Issues Reporters

Coping with the impact of the Canterbury earthquakes

Major earthquakes have a profound impact on people involved, either because they or their loved ones have been directly affected by the loss or damage to property and services or because they have witnessed the injuries or narrowly escaped injury caused by the earthquakes. Continual tremors causing further damage and risk to life make a return to daily life difficult

Emergency services personnel, other workers and volunteers are also affected. They have been working under enormous pressure to support the community and to restore basic services while also experiencing loss and disruption to their lives . A disaster such as the current earthquake can have emotional consequences for anyone nearby who felt threatened or thought that someone close to them may have been killed or injured. Media coverage may also reactivate memories of a similar difficult time from the past.

1 Reactions to earthquakes

Reactions to disasters such as earthquakes can include confusion and disorientation, and strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt and anger. People can have trouble sleeping and concentrating. Others may have distressing thoughts and images of the events.

All of these are normal responses to the shock of the earthquake and for most, will gradually decrease over time, particularly with the help of family and friends. For some people, these problems can last longer and start interfering with their ability to return to their normal routine. People may be more at risk and may need to be monitored by a health professional if they:

- Lost pets and property in the earthquake
- Have been seriously injured or have witnessed shaking and damage to property and been scared by continual sudden after shocks and the effects these could have
- Have developed mental health problems as a result of past traumatic events

2 What helps immediately following earthquakes?

People cope with trauma in different ways. Following an event such as this weekend's earthquake, it is important to regain a sense of safety and control. People often need to have access to a safe and secure environment, to find out what happened to family and friends and to have access to relevant services. Spending time with family and friends is also critical to the recovery process.

Other coping strategies include finding information about the impact of trauma and getting back to daily routines. These include: regular meals, rest and sleep, work, study, relaxation or play. People affected by the earthquakes may wish to place limits on the amount of media coverage they watch, listen to or read. While getting information is important, watching or listening to news too frequently can increase distress.

The Ministry of Health recommends caution about routine debriefing — being asked to talk about the trauma and the emotions associated with it. Such interventions can make matters worse and the principle of helping at the level of basic needs to avoid inadvertent harm is paramount in early responses. We need to ensure that appropriately trained personnel make assessments of whether individuals or families require further intervention. This does not mean that people should not talk about what happened, but it is important that people are not forced to talk about it in graphic detail before they are ready to do so. Nonetheless, people may experience some relief in talking about what happened to them either with someone they trust or with a health professional.¹

People who have been through severe earthquakes need time to manage their distress and cope with what they went through or witnessed. However, those who experience severe distress or who are finding it hard to cope should talk to a health professional — your GP or community health centre is a good place to start.

3 Seeking professional assistance

A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help adults, children, families and workgroups to understand and deal with the thoughts, feelings and actions

¹ Planning for Individual and Community Recovery in an Emergency Event: Principles for Psychosocial Support. National Health Emergency Plan. Wellington: Ministry of Health. 2007.

associated with the trauma of the earthquake. Speak to your doctor about a referral to a psychologist.

People should talk to a health professional immediately if they continue to:

- Feel highly anxious or distressed
- Their reactions to the traumatic event are interfering with home, work and relationships
- Are thinking of harming themselves or someone else.

If you feel unable to cope following a trauma you can seek help from a psychologist, who is trained to assess trauma and to help people to better understand and manage their responses to the trauma by developing effective coping strategies and techniques. A psychologist can also help a person to manage other problems that may be associated with the trauma, such as depression, stress, drug and alcohol use, or personal relationships.

5 Further information

The New Zealand Psychological Society has put together this information to help people as they cope with the impact of the Canterbury earthquake. NZPsS gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Australian Psychological Society in making earlier versions of this material available and the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health for publishing these. The Australian Psychological Society web portal for health professionals www.psid.org.au provides further useful information.

6 About the New Zealand Psychological Society

The New Zealand Psychological Society (NZPsS) was established in 1947 and later as a stand alone incorporated society in 1967. It is the largest professional association for psychologists in Aotearoa/New Zealand with over one thousand practitioner, academic and student psychologists as members or subscribers. Members are able to access a range of benefits and services to support them in their roles as practitioners, educators and researchers. The Society aims to improve individual and community wellbeing by representing, promoting and advancing the scientific discipline and practice of psychology.