



The New Zealand Psychological Society

Te Rōpū Mātai Hinengaro o Aotearoa

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Attention: Science, Health and Social Issues Reporters

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The New Zealand Psychological Society would like to send a message of support to the Christchurch community who are in the midst of a major disaster.

Traumatic events on the scale of this earthquake are expected to produce high levels of emotional distress amongst those affected. In the initial stages of a disaster it is normal to feel a sense of shock and disbelief. Feelings of confusion and uncertainty arise as people struggle to make sense of what has happened. People may react differently to these circumstances. Some react by becoming temporarily 'numb' as a way of protecting themselves from the full import of events while others can find that they become hyper-sensitive to stress or changes in the environment. It is quite normal after extreme trauma to experience nightmares or flashbacks – this is not a sign of psychological disturbance but just part of the way that the mind processes traumatic experiences. As the impact sinks in, people may find themselves overwhelmed by other strong feelings such as fear, anguish and frustration. One of the most difficult feelings associated with a disaster is a sense of helplessness – and this is particularly likely in the Christchurch context where aftershocks create an unpredictable environment and continued stress. It is not only those who were directly affected by the earthquake who may be distressed, large scale trauma like this ripples through whole communities and beyond as people struggle to take in

what has happened and deal with their own feelings of distress and powerlessness.

In most cases people are able to recover psychologically from these difficult experiences without professional help.

Psychological research points to some strategies that may be helpful in coping with the initial impact of a large-scale disaster such as this one:

Social support is one of the most effective ways of helping people through a disaster. A crisis often brings out the strength in a community as members rally together to support one another. Christchurch has shown its resilience in dealing with this before. Contact with other people undergoing similar experiences also provides an opportunity to talk through fears and share information. Psychological research has suggested that contact with friends and family is more helpful than contact with professionals in the early stages of a disaster - although professional help may be needed by some people at a later stage.

Disasters challenge beliefs that the world is secure and predictable. It is especially important for people dealing with disaster to be in an environment which is as **safe and comfortable as possible**. For those awaiting news of their loved ones it would be important to be in an environment in which they felt protected and well looked after, insofar as this is possible in the current circumstances.

Practical assistance is often needed for those who are involved in a disaster. When people are struggling with immediate shock they may need practical help such as providing food, collecting clean clothes or taking care of children. With their energy focused on the emotional demands of the situation it may be hard for them to attend to these issues.

To counteract the experience of helplessness it can be useful encourage people to **do something to help**. This might be taking care of the emotional needs of others or organizing themselves into teams to address practical needs of others or the community as a whole. Goal directed activity helps to re-establish a sense of self efficacy.

People in disaster situations need to have **as much information as is possible**. Even though the current crisis makes it difficult to relay clear information, it is psychologically useful for people to be given updated information on a predictable time table and to have clear channels for doing this. It may be useful for people to have regular updates even when no new information is available.

People need to have knowledge about the **range of services** that are available to help them – both in the immediate situation and in the future. This provides a sense of security as well as hope that there will be assistance available afterwards if necessary. Written information in the form of cards or pamphlets can be helpful as it is difficult to take in and remember spoken information when people are feeling shocked or distracted by current events.

People are naturally particularly concerned about the welfare of **children** in disaster situations. Some people believe that children should be protected from knowledge about these situations but usually children are very good at registering distress in adults. It is often better to calmly provide them with information which is appropriately adjusted to their level of understanding rather than leaving this to their imaginations. In disaster situations children may benefit from being close to familiar adults to increase their sense of safety. They may also benefit from having some of the normal routines of life kept reasonably constant such as dinner time or bed time if this is possible. Support for parents enables them to better provide for their children's emotional needs.

People outside of the immediate community may also be experiencing a sense of distress and helplessness in response to the disaster. People often feel that they want to help in some way and are frustrated that they are unable to do this. While intrusions from outsiders would not necessarily be helpful for the , the opportunity to **donate money or to send messages of support** can be a useful way for people to express their concern and caring for those affected directly by the disaster.

There may be different strategies required if long term support is needed for those affected by this disaster. These suggestions are intended only to facilitate immediate coping.

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. More information can be accessed on www.psychology.org.nz. The NZPsS gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Australian Psychological Society and the American Psychological Society for allowing access to their resources on posttraumatic mental health.

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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.