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Earthquake Stress

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Anxiety Disorders Unit, CDHB (February 2011)

We have now experienced two major earthquakes and are continuing to experience ongoing aftershocks which have had significant consequences for many people.

Following such immensely upsetting events, people understandably feel distressed. It is important to understand:

- § This distress can last days or weeks.
- § Allowing enough time to heal physically and mentally is important to recovery.
- § Support from friends and family helps with recovery.
- § Some people find it helpful to talk about what has happened to them, whereas others prefer not to discuss it.
- § Either strategy is fine, provided you feel able to choose what you do.

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Common responses

The earthquakes and the ongoing aftershocks have had and still are having effects on everyone. It is very normal to experience the following:

- § Feeling tired and exhausted, particularly as time goes on.
- § Feeling frightened, on edge, nervous, and tense.
- § Having difficulty getting to sleep or waking often, waking early and not returning to sleep, or having nightmares.
- § Being easily startled and looking out for danger.
- § Feeling various emotions such as fear, sadness, grief, guilt or self-blame, shame, irritability, anger or feeling numb or detached from self or others. You may also notice marked swings in your emotions.
- § Having anxiety symptoms like a racing heart, rapid breathing, trembling, sweating, loss of appetite and stomach upsets.
- § Having difficulty concentrating, making decisions and remembering - which may obviously make us less productive.
- § Feeling a sense of lack of control.

- § Worrying about what might have been or struggling to deal with real ongoing concerns.
- § Continuing to have thoughts and memories about the event pop into your mind, even days or weeks afterwards.
- § Feeling as if the distressing events are happening again (i.e., flashbacks).
- § Feeling disconnected from reality, like you're in a dream.
- § Having more conflict in our relationships, over-protectiveness or social withdrawal.

It is important to understand that:

- § Reactions can be triggered by further aftershocks, images (things we read or see), and particularly sounds, smells, or movements (such as shaking or swaying) that remind you of the experience.
- § Usually, these reactions will gradually lessen over the following days to weeks as we make sense of what has happened.
- § Many people have lost loved ones, homes, businesses, and other valued aspects of their lives. Grief is a normal reaction to this loss and can take many forms, such as distress, anger, sadness, disbelief, guilt, and helplessness. Peoples' reactions may differ; there is no "right" way to grieve and no "right" timeframe.



Coping mechanisms

It is really important to allow yourself time to work through the experience of the earthquakes. There are many different ways of coping. These may include

- § Talking to family, friends, neighbours and colleagues if this feels okay for you. This may help you feel less alone and more understood, as well as, leading to offers of help. If you do not feel like talking this is okay too.
- § Trying to keep a regular sleep pattern (appreciating that aftershocks may disrupt your sleep at times).
- § Re-establishing usual routines if and when possible (e.g., housework, meals, interacting with others, exercise).
- § Eating regularly and being mindful of nutrition.
- § Keeping physically active which helps reduce tension and anxiety.
- § Pacing yourself by keeping busy and taking time to relax.
- § Trying to increase positive and engaging activities by doing things you enjoy or find satisfying. This will improve your mood and allow less time to brood. Everyone needs some sense of satisfaction no matter how small.
- § Being careful not to watch too much media coverage of the events because this may increase your distress at times. This may also apply to checking earthquake activity sites on the internet.
- § Setting realistic goals. If you try to behave as you did before the recent earthquake you might begin to feel overwhelmed. Allowing a bit of space to come to terms with the consequences of the earthquakes is important.

§ Trying not to become exhausted by trying to get everything done at once. We are all facing a big challenge and this will take time.

§ Restricting your caffeine - four to six cups of caffeinated drinks per day may increase your anxiety levels, and interfere with your sleep.

§ Trying not to increase your use of alcohol or recreational drugs. These may initially relax you, but as they withdraw from your system, they likely will increase your anxiety and affect your sleep patterns.

There is no set way of doing this. Whatever feels right for you will work best.



Reactions of children

A common concern for people is to worry about the effects and reaction of children to these events. It is important to remember that children generally are resilient.

However, younger children may be more clingy, experience bad dreams (not always just about the earthquake), have a loss of appetite, or may complain of physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches.

Suggestions for supporting children include the following:

§ Be supportive and reassuring. Your children may need to be held more often.

§ Remember that your child's fears are genuine to them. They may worry that may need you close. Talk this through with them. Your child may want to re-enact or draw pictures about the earthquake. This is okay.

§ Listen to your child's fears and explanations about what happened.

§ Explain what you know about the disaster. You may need to do this more than once.

§ It is also important to try not to show excessive anxiety with your response to the earthquake as children may pick up on this.

§ Limit children's exposure to media and TV coverage.

§ Return to some sense of normality, such as playing with friends, going back to school (when they reopen).

§ Keeping to regular routines, such as meals and bedtimes.

§ If children are demonstrating aggression or anger, using a nurturing but firm approach, pointing out their behaviour is not acceptable.



Further help

The earthquakes and ongoing aftershocks have been and still are a very frightening experience for everyone. Remember:

§ What most people are experiencing now is a normal response to this extraordinary event.

§ Most people will recover from this but it may take weeks or months.

§ Only a very small percentage of people are likely to have ongoing difficulties.

If you feel that things are not settling, you should contact your GP for advice on how to access appropriate help or phone the special helpline on **0800 777 846**.