

“Eco-Grieving”: The Psychological Effects of Witnessing Climate Change

Whether it’s massive wildfires in California, powerful hurricanes in Florida and the Carolinas, or other natural disasters, everyday seems to bring new reasons to fear for Earth’s climate. This fear has sparked a new term: “eco-grieving,” the grief brought on by witnessing the effects of climate change.

The emotional toll that disasters inflict, even on those not directly involved, can often be overwhelming. That’s why it is important to be conscious of how a disaster influences emotions and to do what is necessary to treat yourself or others who have been impacted by these stressful events.

Understanding the Impact of a Disaster

The emotional toll a disaster takes on people can be difficult to measure and define. Consider the following facts about human reactions to disaster:

- Everyone who sees or experiences a disaster is affected by it in some way.
- It is normal to feel anxious about your own safety and that of your family and close friends.
- Profound sadness, grief and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Acknowledging your feelings helps you recover.
- Focusing on your strengths and abilities helps you heal.
- Accepting help from community programs and resources is healthy.
- Everyone has different needs and different ways of coping.
- It is common to want to strike back at people who have caused great pain.

Children and older adults are of special concern in the aftermath of disasters. Even individuals who experience a disaster “second hand” through exposure to extensive media coverage can be affected.

If you have witnessed a disaster, whether first-hand or in the media, consider contacting local faith-based organizations, voluntary agencies or professional counselors for counseling. Additionally, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and state and local governments of the affected area may provide crisis counseling assistance for those directly in the affected areas.

Recognizing Signs of Disaster-related Stress

When people display the following signs and symptoms after a disaster, they might need crisis counseling or stress management assistance:

- Difficulty communicating thoughts
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty maintaining balance in their lives
- Low threshold of frustration
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol
- Limited attention span
- Poor work performance
- Headaches/stomach problems
- Tunnel vision/muffled hearing
- Colds or flu-like symptoms
- Disorientation or confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Reluctance to leave home
- Depression, sadness
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Mood-swings and easy bouts of crying
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt
- Fear of crowds, strangers or being alone

Easing Disaster-related Stress

The following are ways to ease disaster-related stress:

- Talk with someone about your feelings, such as anger, sorrow and other emotions, even though it may be difficult.
- Seek help from professional counselors who deal with post-disaster stress.
- Do not hold yourself responsible for the disastrous event or be frustrated because you feel you cannot help directly in the rescue work.

- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing by healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation and meditation.
- Maintain a normal family and daily routine, limiting demanding responsibilities on yourself and your family.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Participate in memorials.
- Use existing support groups of family, friends and religious institutions.
- Ensure you are ready for future events by restocking your disaster supplies kits and updating your family disaster plan. Doing these positive actions can be comforting.

Eco-Grieving Resources

A Salt Lake City-based support group, the Good Grief Network, has been at the forefront of counseling those dealing with eco-grieving. The group has developed a 10-step method for dealing emotionally with trauma due to climate change.

10 Steps to Psychosocial Resilience in a Chaotic Climate

1. Accept the problem and its severity
2. Acknowledge being part of the problem as well as the solution
3. Practice sitting with uncertainty
4. Confront your own mortality and the mortality of all
5. Feel your feelings
6. Do inner work
7. Take breaks and rest as needed
8. Develop awareness of brain patterns and perception
9. Show up
10. Reinvest into problem-solving efforts

More information on the steps can be found on the Good Grief Network website: www.goodgrief.org.

Resources

- The Good Grief Network: www.goodgrief.org
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: www.aacap.org
- American Red Cross: www.redcross.org
- Anxiety Disorders Association of America: www.adaa.org
- Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists: www.atss.info
- Mental Health America: www.mentalhealthamerica.net
- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA): www.fema.gov

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