

# How to Cope With Survivor's Guilt Following a Natural Disaster

After a tragic event such as an earthquake, flood, tornado, tsunami, or other natural disaster, those who have survived, or those who have either witnessed or learned a lot about the event can suffer from "survivor's guilt". This can take the form of feeling extremely sad or depressed, feeling helpless, and feeling as if your own undamaged self and lifestyle is a source of pain in itself when faced with the suffering of the many who have suffered so much loss.

Part of the answer to survivor's guilt is to do something constructive and to pace your ingestion of the information about the event. In addition, you can also draw on your inner strength (or discover it) but if not, therapy is always another important possibility. Here are some suggestions for guiding you through survivor's guilt, whether you were in the actual disaster yourself or you're experiencing because of proximity to the disaster or your relationships with the people who have suffered it.

Note: This article is aimed at both those who have been a part of the disaster and those who feel a sense of proximity to it for one reason or other. However, if you were actually a part of the disaster, it is vital to get debriefing at the very least, and to seek counseling for any concerns and emotional problems that you are experiencing. This article presumes that you are doing so.

## Steps

**1 Understand that there is nobody to blame when nature vents her fury.** Accepting this is essential because it allows you to see that everyone feels powerless when a terrible natural disaster event occurs that harms and kills many people. Nobody could have stopped it and nobody is at fault. Sure, there will always be things that could have been done better, from improving building codes to giving out more warnings, but the actual event itself will always stem from something over which human beings have little control.

**2 Minimize your media intake.** If you find yourself getting really upset by all the images, to the point of not being able to function for crying and feeling upset, you're no good to anybody and it's a pointless way to honor those who have lost their lives and livelihoods. Instead, take a break until you feel a bit better (perhaps an early night will right things) and then be very careful about how much you take on board until your emotional strength returns.

**3 Find ways to act constructively.** From helplessness, turn to doing constructive activities that can help the victims. Whether you have suffered damage yourself but have survived the event intact or whether you're someone who lives nearby or you're someone who has read about it all unfolding online, feeling that you can help is an important part of minimizing survivor's guilt. Some of the constructive things you can do include:

- If you have skills or knowledge that can directly assist those in need, offer your time. If you have medical, organizational, cooking, first aid, rescue, legal, accounting, animal welfare, counseling, child-minding, plumbing, electrical, building, etc., skills, all of these and more can help people in need. Sometimes volunteer groups get together, such as the Christchurch student volunteer army, and you can join these groups and give your time and raw skills (such as shoveling mud and shifting debris) for a set time.
- If you can, offer a room in your home for people without a home anymore. What more generosity could you provide than to shelter people who have lost everything? Be aware it has the potential to turn your life upside down but given that the lives of those you're offering to shelter have already been turned upside down, it's just one of those things to come to terms with. And don't forget about the special needs of elderly people who will find it very hard to get their lives back in order again. Another way to help is to offer your care or even shelter for pets or farm animals in need if you have the space and expertise.
- Sharing information around for survivors to learn where they can find water, shelter, medical information, places for their pets to go, food sources, etc.

**4 Be a donor.** In a disaster situation, money is the best possible thing you can donate in our current times. Money

enables people to purchase *exactly* what is needed rather than being confronted by well-meaning but unhelpful donations of items. **Give money**, as much as you can afford to give, knowing that every cent or penny is making a huge difference when pooled together with everyone else's donations.

- If you want to give things, wait until lists are published by aid organizations and governments that clarify exactly what is needed. Otherwise, you risk holding up rescue operations by sending unnecessary items.
- **Donate blood** but *only* if it is called for. While it may seem like the first thing to do, if blood supplies are already well-stocked, your donation may not be needed and may divert health worker resources unnecessarily. If a call is put out, by all means donate but be sure it's not adding to the burden first.

**5 Check out Facebook groups.** One of the things that is becoming increasingly obvious in recent disasters is the use of Facebook for leaving messages of condolences, support, and friendship. People are reaching out to one another across countries to send their wishes and courage to others and to let them know that they're not alone. If this is the only thing you can afford to do, at the very least donate your goodwill and love to people who need it.

- You will probably find lots of Facebook groups set up for any particular disaster. Select the ones that seem to resonate best with you and are expressing your heartfelt concerns and what you wish to get across. You might even consider starting one of your own if you're willing to keep tending it.

**6 Stay in touch with people you know in the disaster area.** Even if you cannot physically help them, you can help them emotionally through talking to them by phone, emailing them, and sending them anything they might need. Let them know how much you love and care about them and that there is always a bed at your house if it gets too much for them and they need to get out of their ravaged environs.

- For anyone who experienced the disaster first-hand, including yourself if relevant, "getting over" it takes a very long time. Being supportive of others through messages of love and concern will be need to be an ongoing activity, and compassion has no limits.
- Realize that staying in touch can be hampered by phone lines being down and electricity cuts. Be patient and **persistent**.

**7 Rediscover your sense of humor.** While natural disasters are terrible events and are not a joke in themselves, many survivors find strength in joking about the manner in which they're coping. After all, having to dig pit toilets in your backyard because the plumbing and electricity no longer work is either something you can cry about or laugh about and the laughter will raise your spirits more.

- If you're not in the disaster yourself, recognize the sense of humor of survivors as a coping mechanism, not a form of belittling the event and support their endeavors to stay strong through humor.

## Tips

- If you weren't involved in the natural disaster but its occurrence makes you feel more vulnerable, use it as a wake-up call to prepare your own needs for keeping safe should a similar event occur where you are. Being proactive about developing a survival kit and making disaster plans with your family can provide you with a sense of reassurance that you're at least prepared.

## Warnings

- If you can't function because of survivor's guilt, see a therapist quickly. It could be that the event has triggered something deeper in you even if you weren't directly involved and if you were in the actual disaster yourself but survived, then initial therapy is important because you're more vulnerable to developing post traumatic distress disorder, anxiety, and other emotional challenges than during "normal" times.

## Things You'll Need

- Internet access

Communications means

### Sources and Citations

- Inspired by Peta Mathias, *Put Survivor Guilt to Good Use*, in *Your Weekend* (Dominion Post lift-out), p. 5, (Saturday, March 12, 2011).

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