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### **Coping with Concerns Following a Tsunami: Information for Canadians**

Disasters, like any life stressor, challenge the way we cope. Whether we learn about them on television or experience them personally, we can feel upset, fearful and anxious as a result, both for our own personal safety and that of our family, friends and community. Stressful events can also bring up feelings and memories of previous traumatic events thereby compounding the distress that we feel.

One cannot imagine the significant psychological trauma experienced by Tsunami victims the moment the wave struck. For many, this trauma will be magnified significantly over time as the extent of the disaster is realized. People may have lost many of, if not all, of their immediate and extended family, social support networks (e.g. neighbourhoods, villages, towns), governmental and service infrastructures, and their economic base.

CPA offers the following **tips** to take care of yourself and your family during this time:

- **Take breaks from thinking about the stressful event.** You will want to keep informed, especially if you have loved ones in a region where there has been a tsunami; however, watching or listening to ongoing footage of the disaster can increase your distress.
- **Talk about your thoughts and feelings.** Talk about your thoughts and feelings with family, friends, co-workers, teachers, spiritual advisors, health professionals or community leaders.
- **Take time to eat well, exercise and sleep.** Eat well, engage in regular exercise, and get plenty of rest. Avoid using alcohol or drugs to numb your feelings. Taking care of your physical well-being is good for your emotional well-being and can enhance your ability to cope.
- **Maintain as normal a routine as you can.** Give yourself a break from constantly thinking about the disaster by maintaining routines and schedules, such as going to work or school and cooking meals.
- **Contribute or volunteer if you can.** Help make a difference by contributing to or volunteering with one of the many organizations set up to provide various forms of assistance to survivors.
- **Take care of your family.** Disasters can be particularly upsetting to children and teenagers. It is important to discuss these issues and give them the opportunity to talk about their concerns. It is important to tell them the truth, to reassure them and to let them know that they can count on you and the adults around them. If you do notice your child or teenager's behaviour has changed significantly at home or at school, discuss the situation with them or contact a regulated health professional for additional help.

### **Things to Keep in Mind about Stress**

While a disaster such as a tsunami can bring tremendous hardship and loss, it is important to remember that:

- People are strong and resilient.
- Everyone faces stressors in their lifetimes and generally have the skills they need to cope.
- Many people who have experienced tragedy find that they grow in some respect as a result of getting through the hardship.
- Reassuring others and receiving reassurance about the steps being taken to protect people's safety are very important to coping well.
- Not everyone reacts to the same event in the same way and not everyone shows their distress in the same way.
- The ways in which children and communities cope and react to a stressor are very influenced by how parents, caregivers and community leaders cope and react.

### **When Psychological Distress Becomes Too Much**

For many individuals, using the information in this document may be enough to help them cope with stressful situations. At times, however, an individual can have difficulty managing stressful situations and the reactions they may evoke. Signs and symptoms that might signal a psychological problem or disorder for which professional help might be a good idea include:

- Sleeping poorly, too much or too little
- Avoiding others
- Experiencing headaches, stomach problems, neck or back pain
- Crying
- Talking less
- Feeling anxious, depressed or having panic attacks
- Feeling angry, guilty, helpless, numb or confused
- Thinking about or watching too much television on the tsunami
- Not wanting to get out of bed or leave the house
- Having difficulties concentrating
- Appetite changes (eating too much or too little)
- Drinking more alcohol or taking more prescription drugs
- Having little patience
- Feeling overprotective of loved ones
- Nervous about leaving home or travelling

It is important to remember that most of us have had some of the signs and symptoms listed above at one time or another. If you have a number of these signs and symptoms and they

- persist beyond a couple of weeks
- persist to the point where you are not able to carry out your usual routines at home, work or in the community, or
- are accompanied by intense feelings of despair or helplessness or suicidal thoughts

please consult a regulated health care professional such as a psychologist, your family physician, a nurse practitioner, a social worker or psychiatrist.

For more information about coping with fear or about consulting a psychologist, contact [cpa@cpa.ca](mailto:cpa@cpa.ca).