

When to see a health care provider

Counselors, doctors, nurses, and clergy people will be happy to talk with you about your experiences. If the symptoms listed above are interfering with your functioning at work or at home a month or more after your accident, or if you are anxious or depressed, it is a good idea to talk to a counselor or health care provider. Don't avoid getting help. You and the ones you love deserve it.

When you do go back out on the water

Residents of coastal communities are very connected to the sea. At some point, possibly very soon after your emergency, you may decide to go back on the water. Trust yourself about when is the best time for you, but don't avoid the activities or career you love because of the anxiety you think they might provoke.

You will likely notice some changes when you go back to sea. Your perception of what is safe may change. Being out on the water may re-trigger responses you thought were over. This is common. Your anxiety will most likely get a little better each time you return to the water, and gradually challenging yourself to do so can be a helpful step in recovery. According to one researcher, "Some people come out of disasters in better condition than they went in. They are psychologically healthier, with improved personal and working lives, a stronger sense of purpose and clearer perspective on their own lives."

Where you can get more help

The US Department of Veterans Affairs offers handouts that include parent tips for children, adolescents, and adults after disasters, as well as information on reactions to trauma, seeking and providing social support, and tips for relaxation. <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/materials/manuals/psych-first-aid.asp>

They also offer an online coaching tool. <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/PTSDCoachOnline/>

The International Association of Fire Fighters has handouts for adult disaster survivors with tips on dealing with flashbacks, post trauma "dos and don'ts," and skill-building for coping with trauma. <https://www.iaff.org/hs/disasterrelief/resources/HandoutsForAdultSurvivors.pdf>

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by Sunny Rice

Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Agent
University of Alaska Fairbanks
Petersburg, AK
(907) 772-3381 • sunny.rice@alaska.edu

and

Bethany Rice, MSW

(counselor and sea accident survivor)



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Coping with an Accident at Sea



Deborah Mercy

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Coping with an Accident at Sea

Those of us who work and live near the sea are used to dealing with stressful situations, but surviving an accident at sea might bring up a different kind of pressure. As you begin to take care of your immediate needs after an accident, you may be concerned by the emotions or physical sensations you continue to feel, even though you are out of immediate danger. Not everyone will respond to a disaster at sea in the same way—even people who lived through the same incident. But researchers have found that there are some common reactions among survivors.

How our brains experience a life-threatening situation

Current research suggests that our brains respond in a unique, self-preserving manner when we experience a situation that feels like our lives or the lives of others are in danger. The memory of the life-threatening event bypasses the hippocampus—the area of the brain that helps you understand where you are and navigate in space. As a result, these memories are not firmly linked to a specific place and time and may resurface unexpectedly.

What you may be experiencing now

The most common reactions to at-sea disasters are

- Trouble sleeping and nightmares.
- Feeling overly jumpy and/or easily startled.
- Loss of concentration.
- Increased irritability or anger.

You may also experience

- Flashbacks—memories, feelings, or sensations of the event that come back unexpectedly.
- Intense physical or emotional reactions when you smell, hear, feel, or see things that remind you of what happened (examples: diesel smell, rocking motion).
- A desire to avoid places, people, or other activities that remind you of the event.
- An inability to remember important details about the event.
- A sense of numbing, detachment, or lack of emotions.
- A lack of awareness of your surroundings (being in a daze or things seem “unreal”).
- Less interest in your usual activities.
- Hopelessness.
- Feeling that you must always be on the lookout for danger.

These symptoms are extremely common reactions to traumatic experiences.

What you can do to help yourself

Talking or writing about what you have experienced and how you are feeling is one of the most effective actions you can take to help yourself and prevent future problems. When you are in a safe environment, reflecting on what happened helps your mind make sense of the events and gain a sense of control over the difficult memories. This helps your mind “contain” the memories by placing the events securely in the time and location in which they occurred so that they are less likely to “intrude” unexpectedly and uncontrollably.

While close friends and family can be a great source of support, don’t be discouraged if other people have a hard time understanding your reactions. Talking about what happened can sometimes be difficult in a small coastal community. You might worry that your story will frighten others who also spend time on the water, you may hesitate to talk about the ways human error could have contributed to the disaster, or you may worry about overwhelming your loved ones. You might also feel that some people are interested in your story only for its shock value. It is up to you to decide who you are comfortable sharing your story with. It may be easier to talk to someone outside your normal social circle, such as a counselor, doctor, nurse, or clergy person. Professional support can provide much-needed confidentiality, understanding, and a neutral perspective. If you have trouble finding someone to talk to, the NAMI¹ hotline (1-800-950-6264) is a good place to start.

Talking to other survivors of your accident

Other people who experienced the same accident you did can be a great source of comfort for you and may be the first people you talk with about your experience. But keep in mind when talking with them that reactions will not be the same for everyone in the incident. Some people may have a much stronger response than you do, or interpret the level of danger differently. Also, a person who has already experienced many threatening situations may find that each new traumatic experience has a stronger impact than the last one.



Sunny Rice

Other actions that may be helpful

- Engage in pleasant, distracting activities off and on, but try not to completely avoid thinking or talking about what happened.
- Get adequate rest and eat healthy foods.
- Try to maintain a normal schedule.
- Take breaks and reminisce about those who lost their lives in the incident, if applicable.
- Focus on something practical you can do now.
- Use relaxation techniques.
- Keep a journal.
- Exercise in moderation. Exercising within 24 hours of the event will help your body process the stress hormones that flooded your body during the incident.

For the longer term, one researcher found that survivors have been helped by:

- Focusing on their sense of purpose or mission in life.
- Attachment to loved ones.
- Maintaining a sense of humor.

Actions that are not helpful

- Using alcohol or drugs to cope.
- Withdrawing from family, friends, pleasant activities.
- Working too much.
- Violence or conflict.
- Doing risky things.
- Extreme avoidance of places or activities that might remind you of the event.
- Excessive TV or computer games.

¹ National Alliance on Mental Illness