

Experts: To avoid depression from Japanese disaster, get involved

To stem off depression, draw on strengths to help others locally

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Disturbing words and images of the anguish in Japan are flooding peoples' consciousness. But sadness or compassion for the Japanese people can become unhealthy, mental health professionals say.

Feeling bad about events one can't change can cause "moderate unhappiness verging on depression," said Stephen Post. Post is director of Stony Brook University's Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics.

The depression stems from feeling "a lot of diffuse compassion" coupled with "not really trying to do anything about it, in the world," Post said. The remedy, he said, is to find specific ways to get involved, or to find another cause that needs you. Healthy compassion should be "an activity," he said.

If someone feels depressed about Japan, "Find a way to manifest that energy locally, with something you

feel committed to." He said that helps people feel "useful that you're drawing on your strength, that you have power to change circumstances." Post has been taking his own advice. His wife Mitsuko, who teaches at Setauket Elementary School, has family living not far from Sendai, near the epicenter of the quake. Although her relatives are alive and well, Post said, he and his wife keep worries at bay by staying involved with groups that help Long Is-

landers.

News about Japan affects different people in different ways, Dr. Harold Pass said. Pass is director of Stony Brook University Hospital's Disaster Mental Health Response Committee.

For anyone old enough to remember crouching under their desks during school air raid drills, Japan's nuclear crisis can bring back

upsetting memories of "waiting for the nuclear holocaust to occur," Pass said.

Survivors of the World Trade Center attacks on 9/11 may feel anxiety, have flashbacks, or find themselves remembering what happened that day, he said.

Kids need special attention now, Pass said. Hearing about giant waves and the Earth opening up can be scary for children and Pass said they "lack the cognitive ability to understand what's going on." Parents, teachers and school psychologists should be on the lookout for these signs suggested by Pass: changes in behavior, moodiness,

fear of going to sleep, looking worried or agitated, or concerns about monsters or other childhood terrors.

A good way to start a dialogue with a child who seems upset about Japan, said Pass, is to say, "How has this made you feel?" He also recommends discussions in schools, particularly in social studies

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— DR. HAROLD PASS

The way to prevent full-on depression from occurring is to get involved, find a cause that needs you.



File photo

Steven Post

classes.

But adults are not immune to psychological symptoms. People who already have anxiety or depression disorders will be especially vulnerable, Pass said.

Things to look for, in yourself or others, include changes in sense of well-being, trouble concentrating, sleep disorders, feeling less energy or feeling more depressed. Pass said anyone experiencing these feelings should talk about it with someone — a colleague, a friend, a partner.

"If the symptoms worsen, you may want to think about consulting a professional," Pass said. "Especially if you've had psychological difficulties in the past."