

# [***East Coasters just felt tremors. What to do if you have earthquake anxiety, according to an expert***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BR4-RBM1-DY7V-G0B9-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Homes and buildings across the Northeast shook briefly Friday morning as a [*4.8 magnitude earthquake*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/05/us/earthquake-nyc-nj-northeast/index.html) hit near New York City, startling residents as far away as Philadelphia and Washington, DC.

No life-threatening situations or reports of significant damage have been reported so far, authorities said, but investigations are ongoing.

Experiencing an earthquake of any magnitude can be frightening, even if no one is hurt and there is little damage, said Dr. Gail Saltz, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the New York-Presbyterian Hospital and Weill Cornell Medical College.

For residents of New York City and the tristate area who lived through 9/11, however, even a mild tremor could trigger flashbacks, according to Saltz, who also hosts the podcast "How Can I Help?" CNN spoke to Saltz about her personal experience and advice for people who may feel uneasy after their experience.

This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

**CNN: Did you feel today's earthquake?**

**Dr. Gail Saltz:** Yes, and oddly enough I wasn't in my office in Manhattan - I was 25 miles away in White Plains, New York, for a meeting with a think tank of psychiatrists. All of us are gathered around a table and suddenly the entire room - the furniture and everything - started to move for about a minute. We all texted our families and discovered that everyone had felt the quake, and thank goodness they were all safe, but then we looked at each other and said, "Oh, people are going to be very disturbed, we should prepare for this."

Earthquakes in the New York City, New Jersey and Connecticut area are uncommon, so for many it is a foreign experience, which makes it more frightening, particularly for people in the tristate area who were around for 9/11.

**CNN: As a psychiatrist, can you explain how past trauma can be resurfaced?**

**Saltz:** The experience of 9/11 was, as you know, horrendous in a million ways -extremely frightening, anxiety-producing and stressful for very understandable reasons - and there are a lot of people who have [*a post-traumatic feeling, if not full blown PTSD*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/15/health/telling-kids-traumatic-events-wellness/index.html), about something that can damage your whole life and is not within your control.

I was not near the towers, but I saw people walking, covered in ash, much like you'd imagine it might look after a nuclear explosion, combined with the knowledge that huge quantities of people were deceased. We were submerged in trauma for weeks. And I know as a psychiatrist that even though people will say "OK, I've gotten over that," past traumas can be resurfaced by an event with a sort of familiarity to it.

And for anyone who has been in a bad earthquake or hurricane or other natural disaster where it was really traumatic, this event could also be frightening and triggering for them as well.

It doesn't take much to trigger your sympathetic nervous system, the ancient part that is always ready to flee or fight during danger, and if you've had trauma it can take longer for it to calm down.

**CNN: For anyone who is feeling that way right now, what do you recommend?**

**Saltz:** The most important thing for people to do is use any coping tools they have to decrease the overall physiological level of anxiety, because that will help you to manage the stress and return back to baseline.

One example is [*deep breathing*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/09/health/stress-relief-breathing-break-wellness/index.html), which you can do for five minutes every couple of hours throughout the day. To do that effectively, breathe slowly in through your nostrils for a count of five, hold it briefly, then exhale slowly through your mouth for a count of seven. That exhale needs to be long and slow, as that is what actually decreases heart rate and calms that flight-or-fight response we all have to stress.

Another helpful coping technique is called progressive muscle relaxation, in which you squeeze and hold various muscle groups to a count of five and then release, moving from the feet all the way up to the body to the head.

You also want to use these tools in the evening so that you can go to sleep and feel more relaxed. Good sleep obviously reduces stress as well.

**CNN: Can people feel as if they are coping, but actually be anxious and stressed?**

**Saltz:** Yes, especially today, when people are already highly stressed and anxious by events in the world, finances, ***politics***, and on and on. You know, some stress is good for us, it helps us get things done.

But when you have high stress, superhigh stress over time, a stress hormone called cortisol is released. When you constantly have high circulating cortisol, it impacts your cardiovascular system, raises your blood pressure, affects the heart, can cause peptic ulcer disease, gastritis and chronic pain syndromes. And some of us are so used to all this stress we almost behave as if it is normal.

**CNN: How can learn to recognize when stress is unhealthy?**

**Saltz:** There are many physical and emotional signs. You might feel jittery all day, a little nauseous, sometimes sweaty, a bit of a panicky feeling. This might make you feel short of breath, or your heart could race or have palpitations.

You may have difficulty falling asleep or you may wake up in the middle of the night and be unable to get back to sleep. You may be feeling tired and exhausted. For some people, there is a disruption of appetite, either feeling like they must eat all the time or, alternatively, have no appetite.

The mind can become preoccupied with recurrent thoughts of often bad things, worries, circular concerns that keep coming back again. You might become irritable, or even rigid, like you used to be able to be flexible and let things roll off your back, but now, forget it. You feel rigid, you feel irritable, you feel angry a lot, or you feel sad.

Feeling high stress can cause you to feel burnt out at work and have feelings of cynicism, feeling very negative, such as "I don't care. This doesn't matter. Anything I do won't matter." You may feel numb and detached, and you might think it's all about the work but it's really about your stress level. These would all be signs that you are just under too much stress.

**CNN: Are there any harmful ways of coping that one might avoid?**

**Saltz:** Yes. Many times people will be tempted to be like, "I'm going to go have a drink, and then maybe another," or turn to other substances to calm themselves. That's not helpful or healthy.

Having another drink or whatever is how people during these high stress times grow an alcohol or recreational drug problem. They don't realize they are using to control anxiety and stress and because we all have stress, and they are creating an addiction in the process.

Instead, consider calling someone you trust and feel comfortable with and share your experience. You know, "I felt nervous or it reminded me of this." Just being able to talk about it will help you process it. Some people feel better by writing how they felt, such as in a journal. But having a way to express your feelings will help to ease the anxiety and stress you may be feeling.

By Sandee LaMotte, CNN

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