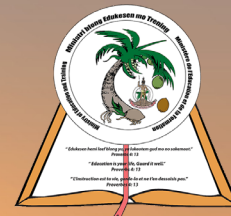


Earthquake
Response



That Day

By Aga Kochanowicz
Illustrated by Shaina Nayyar and
John Robert Azuelo



Older
Readers

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John Robert Azuelo

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That day...

I will remember that day for the rest of my life, no doubt.

When the earthquake stopped, my room was a disaster — a total mess. Bookshelves had fallen to the floor, scattering all my books, toys, and belongings. The corner of one shelf had scraped my arm as it fell. My bed had moved from the corner to the middle of the room, and pictures from the wall had crashed to the floor.

I couldn't believe what was happening! I was shocked and numb. I didn't feel any pain in my arm, but I could hear crying and people shouting outside.



“Get out! Get out!” It sounded like an echo. I quickly hid under the desk when I realised that the shaking was getting stronger and stronger.

Just thirty seconds before I had been doing normal things — listening to music and getting ready to meet my friend Lea. Suddenly everything was different. Sitting under the desk, my thoughts started to spin like crazy.

I was supposed to meet Lea. I needed to call her! How was my mum? How was my dad? Were my sister and brother alright? It was very scary. I grabbed my phone from the floor, but it was broken. The more thoughts I had, the more fear and helplessness I felt.

The first relief came when my dad ran into our house and found me under the desk. The second relief was when he hugged me and told me that Mum and my siblings were also safe.

The next few hours were still tense as we had to run up to higher parts of the town in case of a tsunami, and we had no news from our friends or extended family. There was no power, no internet, and the night was coming. That night was very long and worrying, but at least we were together.

That day felt like a movie. A very scary movie.







A couple of days later...

Sometimes, it feels like that day is still happening. I feel stuck with my feelings and thoughts. It's a mixture of relief and stress. Some good news has come through. My grandparents are fine; they didn't even feel the earthquake on their island. People keep telling me my stress is mainly because of the aftershocks.

First of all, I am ashamed that I didn't run out like I was supposed to. I avoid talking about my reaction, thinking that something is wrong with me. I pretend to be fine, but at night it's hard to fall asleep. It's hard to sleep the whole night. I wake up sweaty and breathing heavily... I don't like it.



My friend Lea is safe, although she saw a building collapse and there was a lot of panic around her. She is furious with me for being late to our meeting. I am ashamed that I wasn't able to message or call her, and she had been alone waiting for me when the earthquake happened. I had been alone, too. I wish we were together in that moment. The more Lea is angry with me, the more I avoid her. We don't know how to talk about it... but I know one day we will have to.

Maybe my writing is a bit chaotic, but that's how I feel. It's hard to focus. I keep changing topics, struggling to push away all the thoughts and memories, pretending and forcing myself not to break down. My memories are mixed with reality. The feeling of safety here and now is mixed with alertness and fear every time I see collapsed buildings, fences, or landslides.



Sometimes, the sound of a truck rumbling down the main street scares me because it sounds like another quake. I think that this is something that everyone can relate to — the rumbling of a truck, a super normal thing prior to the earthquake, can stress people out. But the worst are the aftershocks. My body stiffens with fear.

I'm tired of pretending and avoiding. At least here, in writing, I can be honest. It helps a bit.



I miss feeling safe in my room. I miss having fun with my friend. I miss feeling calm when my family isn't with me. I miss feeling at ease and relaxed. I miss the person I was before the earthquake.

My eyes are full of tears, so I'd better stop writing...



A few weeks later...

I will remember that day for the rest of my life, but it feels different now.

I can relax and take care of myself when the memories come up. I can separate what is happening now from what happened that day, like when I'm triggered by what I see around me.

I'm not ashamed anymore. The moment I listened to people in the church sharing their experiences, I realised that I wasn't the only one. My reaction was normal. What a relief.

After that, I found the courage to talk to someone I trusted. I revealed my feelings and thoughts. I received support and understanding. Back then, I just wanted to make sense of my reactions and feelings, to ensure I had done my best.



The biggest discovery for me is that my feelings are not against me. They want to help me feel safe, understood, and accepted. Before, I thought I needed to get rid of my feelings or at least hide them. You might ask, “So, what’s good about fear or anger?” Some people say, “You’re weak. You’re a bad person,” when you’re afraid or angry, and since those feelings hurt, I thought they were bad.

But I was wrong. They’re good, because they inform me about my needs — like when I don’t feel safe enough or when I need more respect, acceptance, or choices. I am more curious and open to looking for ways to express my feelings and needs. When I find it, it works, even though it takes time. Since I have received support, I understand myself better, and I’m trying to be kinder to myself. My feelings matter, and I matter, too.

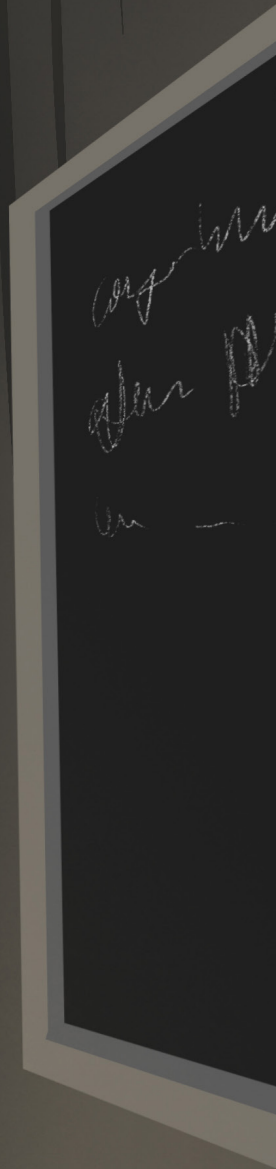
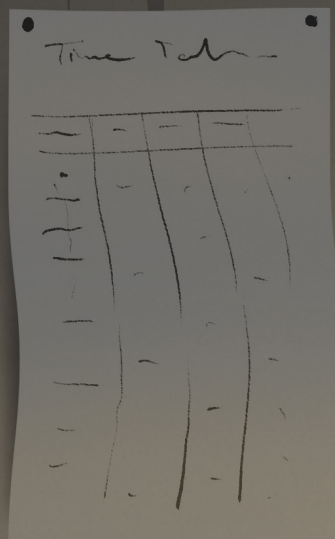


I also know now that my friend's anger was her way of coping with the helplessness she felt that day. Thank God we spoke about it and stopped avoiding it. It feels so good to have her back.

She's not angry anymore. She was scared, trapped, and helpless at that moment, and wanted someone to blame for that. She doesn't blame me anymore, and I don't blame myself. I understand her, and we've agreed to talk about difficult moments instead of avoiding each other. Maybe it's strange, but I feel even closer to her now.

So, a few weeks later, I find myself calmer and safer again. I've spent some time understanding what happened to me, my family, and my friends. I can reassure myself when small triggers happen that I am safe again. I can breathe and relax my body. I enjoy sleeping again and giving support to my friends, who are still struggling.





It feels so good when I'm connected and not alone. We have a volunteering circle at school for those who want to talk or just listen and normalise the way they feel. It was my idea, and I am happy to bring this relief to others, too.

I feel empowered and strong. I like it.

**You can use these questions
to talk about this book with
your family, friends and
teachers.**



What disaster happened to Mia and her village?



**Mia says she reacted the wrong way.
What was she supposed to do?**



**How did processing her emotions
help Mia and her family?**

Have you ever kept a diary?



Everything Mia and her friends and family went through were normal ways of reacting to scary events. Talk to your family and friends about how you would handle a situation like this.

About the contributors

Agnieszka Kochanowicz has lived in several places. While writing this story, she was based in Vanuatu before moving with her family to Europe. As a psychologist, she enjoys supporting children through therapeutic stories about feelings, hoping to inspire greater understanding and kindness towards themselves and others.



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That Day

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Original illustrations by Shaina Nayyar and John Robert Azuelo

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Kochanowicz, Aga

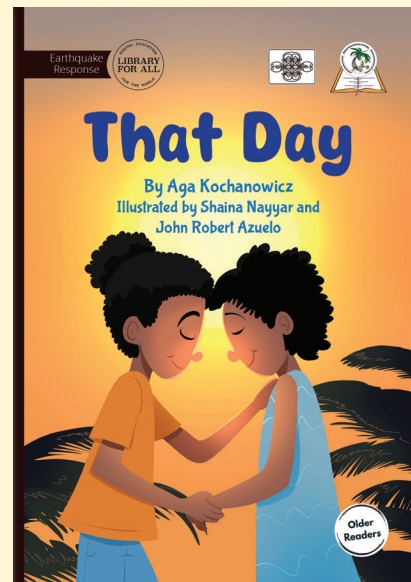
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An earthquake can be a devastating thing to witness and even harder to cope with afterwards. Mia writes down her journey in a diary from the day of the disaster, to a few days later, to several weeks afterwards.



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