

## Processing Emotions During Disaster Recovery

Losing a home can cause significant emotional distress. You should not underestimate the challenge of evacuation, relocation and rebuilding after a disaster. It is common for people to experience several stages of adjustment including shock, anger, depression and hopelessness. Ultimately, however, people can reach a stage of acceptance and become able to move beyond disbelief, bitterness and sadness. Positive feelings can begin to re-emerge as the focus shifts towards the future. Safety, security and comfort are regained, and life moves forward once again.

### Common Emotional Responses

Following disaster, people frequently feel stunned, disoriented or unable to integrate distressing information. Once these initial reactions subside, people can experience a variety of thoughts and behaviors. Common responses can be:

- **Intense or unpredictable feelings.** You may be anxious, nervous, overwhelmed or grief-stricken. You may also feel more irritable or moody than usual.
- **Changes to thoughts and behavior patterns.** You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event. These memories may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. It may be difficult to concentrate or make decisions. Sleep and eating patterns also can be disrupted — some people may overeat and oversleep, while others experience a loss of sleep and loss of appetite.
- **Sensitivity to environmental factors.** Sirens, loud noises, burning smells or other environmental sensations may stimulate memories of the disaster creating heightened anxiety. These “triggers” may be accompanied by fears that the stressful event will be repeated.
- **Strained interpersonal relationships.** Increased conflict, such as more frequent disagreements with family members and coworkers, can occur. You might also become withdrawn, isolated or disengaged from your usual social activities.
- **Stress-related physical symptoms.** Headaches, nausea and chest pain may occur and could require medical attention. Preexisting medical conditions could be affected by disaster-related stress.

### **Common Reactions:**

- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation; difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Apathy and emotional numbing
- Nightmares and recurring thoughts about the event
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness and depression

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- **Give yourself time to adjust.** Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced and try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- **Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathize with your situation.** Social support is a key component to disaster recovery. Family and friends can be an important resource. You can find support and common ground from those who've also survived the disaster. You may also want to reach out to others not involved who may be able to provide greater support and objectivity.
- **Communicate your experience.** Express what you are feeling in whatever ways feel comfortable to you — such as talking with family or close friends, keeping a diary or engaging in a creative activity (e.g., drawing, molding clay, etc.).
- **Find a local support group led by appropriately trained and experienced professionals.** Support groups are frequently available for survivors. Group discussion can help you realize that you are not alone in your reactions and emotions. Support group meetings can be especially helpful for people with limited personal support systems.
- **Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress.** Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can be a numbing diversion that could detract from as well as delay active coping and moving forward from the disaster.
- **Establish or reestablish routines.** This can include eating meals at regular times, sleeping and waking on a regular cycle, or following an exercise program. Build in some positive routines to have something to look forward to during these distressing times, like pursuing a hobby, walking through an attractive park or neighborhood, or reading a good book.
- **Avoid making major life decisions.** Switching careers or jobs and other important decisions tend to be highly stressful in their own right and even harder to take on when you're recovering from a disaster.

## Self-Care Strategies

In the middle of a crisis, it can become difficult to take care of yourself with so many other worries preoccupying your mind. However, this is a good time to think about your personal resiliency, healing and a sense of normality. Some self-care strategies you may want to consider are:

- Practicing proven stress-reduction techniques, such as regular exercises, meditation and deep breathing.
- Allowing yourself to feel bad, cry and release negative emotions in a healthy manner.

- Giving yourself permission to feel good. You can have periods of joy even when coping with loss.
- Making small decisions daily in order to feel in control of your life once more.
- Putting off major life decisions, such as switching jobs, if possible.
- Lowering your expectations of what you “should be doing.”
- Not isolating yourself too much. Spending some time with people is healthy in recovery.
- Talking about your ordeal with friends and family.
- Taking advantage of community support.
- Focusing on what you are thankful for in spite of your loss.
- Staying away from unprescribed mood-altering substances, such as alcohol and other drugs.
- Getting plenty of rest when possible and maintain a normal sleep/wake cycle.
- Eating well-balanced meals.

### Other Tips for Coping:

- **Ask for help if you need it.** If your stress gets in the way of your daily life, or if it lasts longer than 3 – 4 weeks, talk with someone. Start with a trusted friend, relative or minister. You may want to talk with a mental health professional or join a support group. This is especially important for people who have existing mental health problems or those who have survived past trauma. Asking for help is a sign of strength and courage.
- **Talk about it.** Talking with others, especially friends and family, can relieve stress and build community. If you have children, encourage them to share their feelings and concerns with you.
- **Take care of yourself.** Rest, exercise, and eat healthy foods. Try to maintain your daily routine. Continue your usual recreational and outdoor activities when conditions allow.
- **Take one thing at a time.** Break jobs up into doable tasks. Completing each task will give you a sense of accomplishment and make things seem less overwhelming.
- **Help if you can.** Helping others can give you a sense of purpose in a situation that feels beyond your control.
- **Avoid drugs and excessive drinking.** Drugs and alcohol may seem to help you feel better, but in the long run they generally create additional problems that compound the stress you are already feeling

### Frequently Asked Questions about Disaster Response and Recovery

#### ***What happens when people experience a disaster or traumatic event?***

Shock and denial are typical responses to large-scale natural disasters, especially shortly after the event. Both shock and denial are normal protective reactions. Once the initial shock subsides, reactions vary from one person to another. The following are common responses to a traumatic event:

- **Feelings become intense and sometimes are unpredictable.** You may become more irritable than usual, and your mood may change back and forth dramatically. You might be especially anxious or nervous, or even become depressed.
- **Thoughts and behavior patterns are affected.** You might have repeated and vivid memories of evacuating or seeing the fire, tornado, or hurricane approach. These flashbacks may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused. Sleep and eating patterns also may be disrupted.
- **Recurring emotional reactions are common.** Reminders or "triggers" such as inclement weather, smoke, ash, sirens or fire trucks can create anxiety.
- **Interpersonal relationships can become strained, particularly if you are living in temporary housing.** You may experience arguments with family or friends. On the other hand, you might become withdrawn and isolated and avoid your usual activities.
- **Physical symptoms may accompany the extreme stress.** For example, headaches, nausea and chest pain may result and may require medical attention. Pre-existing medical conditions may worsen due to the stress. It is important to realize that there is no one 'standard' pattern of reaction to the extreme stress of traumatic experiences.

### ***How can I help myself and my family?***

There are a number of steps you can take to help restore emotional well being and a sense of control in your life, including the following:

- **Give yourself time to adjust.** Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced.
- **Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen to your concerns.** If those closest to you also have experienced or witnessed the disaster, realize that they may not be able to be as supportive as usual.
- **Turn it off and take a break.** You may want to keep informed, but try to limit the amount of news you take in whether it's from the internet, television, newspapers or magazines. While getting the news informs you, being over exposed to the news can actually increase your stress.
- **Find out about local support groups that are available for those who have suffered as a result of the disaster.** Particularly those that are led by appropriately trained and experienced professionals such as psychologists. These groups can be especially helpful for people with limited personal support systems.
- **Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress.** Eat well-balanced meals, get some exercise and try to rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can suppress your feelings rather than

help you to manage or lessen your distress. They can also intensify your emotional or physical pain.

- **Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program.** Schedule some breaks to distract yourself from thinking about the disaster and focus instead on something you enjoy. Try to do something that will lift your spirits.
- **Avoid major life decisions such as switching jobs, making large purchases or making sudden changes in your relationships.** These activities have their own stresses that can exacerbate your current circumstances.

### ***How can I take care of children's special needs?***

The intense anxiety and fear that often follow a disaster can be particularly troubling for children, especially if they have witnessed the disaster, lost their home, etc. Some may regress and demonstrate younger behaviors. Children may be more prone to nightmares and fear of sleeping alone. Performance in school may suffer. Other changes in behavior patterns may include throwing tantrums more frequently, or withdrawing and becoming more solitary. There are several things parents and others who care for children can do to help alleviate the emotional consequences of the disaster, including the following:

- **Spend more time with children and let them be more dependent on you during the months following the disaster.** Affection can be comforting to children who have experienced trauma.
- **Provide play experiences to help relieve tension.** Younger children in particular may find it easier to share their ideas and feelings about the event through non-verbal activities such as drawing.
- **Encourage older children to speak with you, and with one another, about their thoughts and feelings.** This helps reduce their confusion and anxiety about the disaster. Respond to questions in terms they can comprehend. Reassure them repeatedly that you care about them and that you understand their fears and concerns.
- **Keep regular schedules for activities such as eating, playing and going to bed.** Help restore a sense of security and normalcy.
- **Reduce the number of times children see the trauma on the news.** Repeatedly watching broadcasts of the disaster can re-traumatize children.

### ***When should I seek additional help?***

Some people are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by natural disasters by using their own support systems. Serious problems, however, can persist and continue to interfere with daily living. For example, some may feel overwhelming nervousness or lingering sadness that adversely affects job performance and interpersonal relationships.

- Individuals with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional. Psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers help educate people about normal responses to extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact.
- With children, continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the disaster, continued and extreme withdrawal, and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents understand and deal with their thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

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