



## **Things You Can Do While You're Living Through a Natural Disaster such as Flooding**

1. Take immediate action to ensure your physical safety and the safety of others. If it's possible, remove yourself from the event/scene in order to avoid further traumatic exposure.
2. Address your acute medical needs (e.g., If you're having difficulty breathing, experiencing chest pains or palpitations, seek immediate medical attention).
3. Find a safe place that offers shelter, water, food and sanitation.
4. Become aware of how the event is affecting you (i.e., your feelings, thoughts, actions—and your physical and spiritual reactions).
5. Know that your reactions are normal responses to an abnormal event. You are not “losing it” or “going crazy.”
6. Speak with your physician or healthcare provider and make him/her aware of what has happened to you.
7. Be aware of how you're holding-up when there are children around you. Children will take their cues from the adults around them.
8. Try to obtain information. Knowing the facts about what has happened will help you to keep functioning.
9. If possible, surround yourself with family and loved ones. Realize that the event is likely affecting them, too.
10. Tell your story. And, allow yourself to feel. It's okay—not to be okay during a traumatic experience.
11. You may experience a desire to withdraw and isolate, causing a strain on significant others. Resist the urge to shut down and retreat into your own world.
12. Traumatic stress may compromise your ability to think clearly. If you find it difficult to concentrate when someone is speaking to you, focus on the specific words they are saying—work to actively listen. Slow down the conversation and try repeating what you have just heard.
13. Don't make important decisions when you're feeling overwhelmed. Allow trusted family members or friends to assist you with necessary decision-making.
14. If stress is causing you to react physically, use controlled breathing techniques to stabilize yourself. Take a slow deep breath by inhaling through your nose, hold your breath for 5 seconds and then exhale through your mouth. Upon exhalation, think the words “relax,” “let go,” or “I'm handling this.” Repeat this process several times.

15. Realize that repetitive thinking and sleep difficulties are normal reactions. Don't fight the sleep difficulty. Try the following: Eliminate caffeine for 4 hours prior to your bedtime, create the best sleep environment you can, consider taking a few moments before turning out the lights to write down your thoughts—thus emptying your mind.
16. Give yourself permission to rest, relax and engage in non-threatening activity. Read, listen to music, consider taking a warm bath, etc.
17. Physical exercise may help to dissipate the stress energy that has been generated by your experience. Take a walk, ride a bike, or swim.
18. Create a journal. Writing about your experience may help to expose yourself to painful thoughts and feelings and, ultimately, enable you to assimilate your experience.
19. If you find that your experience is too powerful, allow yourself the advantage of professional and/or spiritual guidance, support and education.
20. Try to maintain your schedule. Traumatic events will disrupt the sense of normalcy. We are all creatures of habit. By maintaining our routines, we can maintain a sense of control at a time when circumstances may lead us to feel a loss of control.
21. Crises present opportunities. Cultivate a mission and purpose. Seize the energy from your experience and use it to propel you to set realistic goals, make decisions and take action.

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*The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress*

*www.aaets.org*

## **Helping Children Cope with Disaster**

Earthquakes...Tornadoes...Fires... Floods...Hurricanes... Hazardous Material Spills

Disaster may strike quickly and without warning. These events can be frightening for adults, but they are traumatic for children if they don't know what to do.

During a disaster, your family may have to leave your home and daily routine. Children may become anxious, confused or frightened. As an adult, you'll need to cope with the disaster in a way that will help children avoid developing a permanent sense of loss. It is important to give children guidance that will help them reduce their fears.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the American Red Cross have prepared this brochure to help you help your children cope. Ultimately, you should decide what's best for your children, but consider using these suggestions as guidelines.

## **Children and Their Response to Disaster**

### **Children depend on daily routines:**

They wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, and play with friends. When emergencies or disasters interrupt this routine, children may become anxious.

In a disaster, they'll look to you and other adults for help. How you react to an emergency gives them clues on how to act. If you react with alarm, a child may become more scared. They see our fear as proof that the danger is real. If you seem overcome with a sense of loss, a child may feel their losses more strongly.

Children's fears also may stem from their imagination, and you should take these feelings seriously. A child who feels afraid is afraid. Your words and actions can provide reassurance. When talking with your child, be sure to present a realistic picture that is both honest and manageable.

Feelings of fear are healthy and natural for adults and children. But as an adult, you need to keep control of the situation. When you're sure that danger has passed, concentrate on your child's emotional needs by asking the child what's uppermost in his or her mind. Having children participate in the family's recovery activities will help them feel that their life will return to "normal." Your response during this time may have a lasting impact.

Be aware that after a disaster, children are most afraid that--

- the event will happen again.
- someone will be injured or killed.
- they will be separated from the family.
- they will be left alone.

### **Advice to Parents: Prepare for Disaster**

You can create a Family Disaster Plan by taking four simple steps. First, learn what hazards exist in your community and how to prepare for each. Then meet with your family to discuss what you would do, as a group, in each situation.

Next, take steps to prepare your family for a disaster such as: posting emergency phone numbers, selecting an out-of-state family contact, assembling disaster supplies kits for each member of your household and installing smoke detectors on each level of your home. Finally, practice your Family Disaster Plan so that everyone will remember what to do when a disaster does occur.

- Develop and practice a Family Disaster Plan. Contact your local emergency management or civil defense office, or your local Red Cross chapter for materials that describe how your family can create a disaster plan. Everyone in the household, including children, should play a part in the family's response and recovery efforts.
- Teach your child how to recognize danger signals. Make sure your child knows what smoke detectors, fire alarms and local community warning systems (horns, sirens) sound like.
- Explain how to call for help. Teach your child how and when to call for help. Check the telephone directory for local emergency phone numbers and post these phone numbers by all telephones. If you live in a 9-1-1-service area, tell your child to call 9-1-1.
- Help your child memorize important family information. Children should memorize their family name, address and phone number. They should also know where to meet in case of an emergency. Some children may not be old enough to memorize the information. They could carry a small index card that lists emergency information to give to an adult or babysitter.

## **AFTER THE DISASTER: TIME FOR RECOVERY**

- Immediately after the disaster, try to reduce your child's fear and anxiety.
- Keep the family together. While you look for housing and assistance, you may want to leave your children with relatives or friends. Instead, keep the family together as much as possible and make children a part of what you are doing to get the family back on its feet. Children get anxious, and they'll worry that their parents won't return.
- Calmly and firmly explain the situation. As best as you can, tell children what you know about the disaster. Explain what will happen next. For example, say, "Tonight, we will all stay together in the shelter." Get down to the child's eye level and talk to them.
- Encourage children to talk. Let children talk about the disaster and ask questions as much as they want. Encourage children to describe what they're feeling. Listen to what they say. If possible, include the entire family in the discussion.
- Include children in recovery activities. Give children chores that are their responsibility. This will help children feel they are part of the recovery. Having a task will help them understand that everything will be all right.

You can help children cope by understanding what causes their anxieties and fears. Reassure them with firmness and love. Your children will realize that life will eventually return to normal. If a child does not respond to the above suggestions, seek help from a mental health specialist or a member of the clergy.

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## **Tips for Survivors of a Traumatic Event**

The effect of a disaster or traumatic event goes far beyond its immediate devastation. Just as it takes time to reconstruct damaged buildings, it takes time to grieve and rebuild our lives. Life may not return to normal for months, or even years, following a disaster or traumatic event. There may be changes in living conditions that cause changes in day-to-day activities, leading to strains in relationships, changes in expectations, and shifts in responsibilities. These disruptions in relationships, roles, and routines can make life unfamiliar or unpredictable.

### **Things to Remember When Trying to Understand Disaster Events**

- No one who experiences a disaster is untouched by it.
- It is normal to feel anxious about you and your family's safety.
- Profound sadness, grief, and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Acknowledging our feelings helps us recover.
- Focusing on your strengths and abilities will help you to heal.
- Accepting help from community programs and resources is healthy.
- We each have different needs and different ways of coping.
- It is common to want to strike back at people who have caused great pain. However, nothing good is accomplished by hateful language or actions.

## Signs that Stress Management Assistance Is Needed

- Disorientation or confusion and difficulty communicating thoughts.
- Limited attention span and difficulty concentrating
- Becoming easily frustrated.
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt.
- Depression, sadness, and feelings of hopelessness.
- Mood swings and crying easily.
- Difficulty maintaining balance.
- Headaches/stomach problems.
- Tunnel vision/muffled hearing.
- Colds or flu-like symptoms.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Poor work performance.
- Reluctance to leave home.
- Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone.
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol.

## Ways to Ease the Stress

- Talk with someone about your feelings (anger, sorrow, and other emotions) even though it may be difficult.
- Don't hold yourself responsible for the disastrous event or be frustrated because you feel that you cannot help directly in the rescue work.
- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing by staying active in your daily life patterns or by adjusting them. A healthy approach to life (e.g., healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation, meditation) will help both you and your family.
- Maintain a normal household and daily routine, limiting demanding responsibilities of yourself and your family.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Participate in memorials, rituals, and the use of symbols as a way to express feelings.
- Use existing supports groups of family, friends, and spiritual/religious outlets.
- Establish a family emergency plan. It can be comforting to know that there is something you can do.

A disaster or traumatic event can have far-reaching effects in several major areas of our lives, making rebuilding our emotional lives extremely difficult. However, sometimes just knowing what to expect can help ease the transition back to a normal life. As you and your family begin to rebuild your lives, you may face any or all of the situations described below.

## Personal Uncertainties

- Feeling mentally drained and physically exhausted is normal and common.
- The loss of a home, business, or income may result in displacement and confusion about the future.
- Unresolved emotional issues or pre-existing problems and previous losses may resurface.
- Anniversaries of the disaster or traumatic event remind us of our losses. This reaction may be triggered by the event date each month and may be especially strong on the yearly anniversary of the event.

## Family Relationship Changes

- Relationships may become stressed when everyone's emotions are heightened, and Conflicts with spouses and other family members may increase.
- When homes are destroyed or damaged, families may have to live in temporary housing or with relatives and friends, leading to overcrowding and added tension.
- Family members or friends may be forced to move out of the area, disrupting relationships and usual support systems.
- Parents may be physically or emotionally unavailable to their children following a disaster or traumatic event, because they are busy cleaning up or are preoccupied, distracted, or distressed by difficulties related to the event.
- Parents may become overprotective of their children and their children's safety.
- Children may be expected to take on more adult roles, such as watching siblings or helping with cleanup efforts, leaving less time to spend with friends or participate in routine activities, such as summer camp or field trips.

## Work Disruptions

- Fatigue and increased stress from preoccupation with personal issues can lead to poor work performance.
- Conflicts with co-workers may increase, because of the added stress.
- Businesses may be forced to lay off employees, or company work hours and wages may be cut.
- Reduced income may require taking a second job.
- Daily travel and commute patterns may be disrupted, because of the loss of a car or road reconstruction.

## Financial Worries

- Those who experience work disruptions may be unable to regain their previous standard of living, leading to financial concerns and unpaid bills.
- Seeking financial assistance to rebuild and repair damages adds to the already high levels of stress caused by the disaster or traumatic event, and the hassles of dealing with a bureaucracy can add to the frustration.

## How to Be a Survivor

Regardless of individual circumstances, everyone needs to complete several steps to recovery from a disaster or traumatic event.

- Accept the reality of the loss.
- Allow yourself and other family members to feel sadness and grief over what has happened.
- Adjust to a new environment. Acknowledge that the person or possessions lost are gone forever.
- Put closure to the situation and move on. Do not continue to let the loss take its physical, emotional, or spiritual toll.
- Have faith in better times to come.

You and your family have survived a traumatic event. That doesn't mean your lives are over or that you don't deserve to be happy again. Return to doing things you enjoy with friends and as a family. Reestablish the routines of your life. Make commitments and keep them.

If you or a member of your family still has trouble coping, ask for help. Consult a counselor or mental health professional. In the workplace, you may be able to get assistance from your human resources department or your employer's Employee Assistance Program.

## **Additional Resources for Flood Recovery**

### **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)**

500 C Street, S.W.

Washington, DC 20472

Toll-free: 800-621-FEMA

Web site: [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)

### **American Red Cross**

1-800-Red-Cross

[www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)

## **About the DOI Employee Assistance Program**

Your DOI Employee Assistance Program (EAP) offers no cost, confidential counseling and referral for most any personal, family or work-related concern as well as offering a variety of web-based resources. You may contact the EAP at 800-869-0276 or you may access services on-line by visiting the DOI EAP website, [www.eapconsultants.com](http://www.eapconsultants.com). Then click on the Member Access page and click on Request EAP Services. Your password is: interioreap