

Disaster Relief

Dealing with Stress after a Disaster

A natural disaster leaves a trail of property destruction, and many times it leaves thousands of its victims with a damaged sense of balance. In addition to restoring buildings and replacing material possessions, victims may need to devote time to restoring their own emotional well being during the recovery period. This can be especially important for children who do not have experience to guide them.

Recognize Symptoms of Family Stress

According to Family Information Services, families experiencing stress may have symptoms that include any of these:

- little time to spend together
- a sense of frustration -- too much to do
- a desire for the simpler life
- never time to relax
- not enough opportunities to talk
- explosive arguments
- bickering
- conversations centered on time and tasks rather than people and feelings
- meals eaten in a hurry
- constant rushing from place to place, task to task
- escaping into work or other activities
- isolation in a room
- not enough one-on-one contact
- a sense of guilt

Focusing on the present can help people work through many of life's setbacks, both big and small. Spending time wondering "what could have been" or thinking about "if only" will cause more stress, because the situation is in the past and out of their control.

Tips

- Be extra patient.
- Determine what's really important, keeping in mind that your spouse's viewpoint on what should be considered top priority may be different from yours.
- Don't expect things to instantly restore themselves. Accept that restoration (both physical and emotional) takes time.
- Realize that disaster victims have suffered losses and it's natural for them to express disbelief, anger, sadness, anxiety, and depression afterwards.
- Realize that the emotions of victims will roller-coaster, and moods can change unexpectedly.
- Don't overlook the feelings of children as you deal with the situation. They need to feel they can count on you for the extra attention, love, and support needed to get through.
- Reassure them, making sure they understand they are not responsible for the problems you face.
- Try to keep your family diet as nourishing as possible under the circumstances.
- Refocusing on the big picture, instead of the little details and the little problems, will give you a sense of competency.
- Talk with friends, family, counselors, or members of the clergy. In crisis situations, a supportive network is essential.
- Be aware of the tendency to resort to bad habits when you are under stress.
- Get enough sleep. Being a "sleep cheat" ultimately will backfire. Try to get 7 to 8 hours of sleep every night. Avoid sleeping pills, since these pills hurt normal sleep patterns.

- Make a list. List the things that need to be done first, second, third, and so on. By ranking what needs to be done, you first take care of the tasks you can't put off. Too often, we try to do everything at once, with nothing getting done the right way.
- Learn acceptance. So often, we worry about things we cannot control. Face that fact. If you cannot control a situation or occurrence, then learn to accept that. Save your energies for things you can control.

Based on information developed by Clemson Cooperative Extension following Hurricane Hugo. Revised for Virginia audiences by Virginia Cooperative Extension, April 10, 1997.

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