

Disaster Relief

How Families and Neighbors Can Help One Another Cope



Disasters bring an incredible range of emotions. Survivors can feel anger and euphoria at the same time. Temporary homelessness, damaged personal items, lost crops, and an uncertain future weigh heavily on disaster victims. Unfortunately, the need to talk about one's losses, fears, and anxieties may be forgotten in the wake of cleanup efforts.

Mental health professionals have identified a number of post-disaster phases survivors may experience, as well as guidelines for managing disaster-related stress. The most important coping tools are our abilities to listen, talk, and actively support one another during this time.

It is important to "lean" on your support group, which can include family, friends, neighbors, and church members.

It is important to recognize the emotional phases you may experience after disaster. The four principal phases are discussed in the following sections. Phases often overlap.

Phase 1: Heroic phase

At the time the disaster hits and immediately after, emotions are strong and direct. People find themselves being called upon and responding to demands for heroic action to save their own and others' lives and property. People act unselfishly. They help others survive and recover. The most important resources during this phase are family groups, neighbors, and various emergency teams.

Phase 2: Honeymoon phase

This period generally is from 1 week to 6 months after the disaster. For survivors, even with the loss of loved ones and possessions, there is a strong sense of having shared with others a dangerous, catastrophic experience and having lived through it. Research has shown many disaster victims think of their fellow shelter residents as family.

Supported and often encouraged by the influx of official and governmental staff who promise many kinds of help, the victims begin cleanup. There is anticipation that more help will soon be available. Preexisting community groups and emergency community groups are very important resources during this period.

Phase 3: Disillusionment phase

This phase can last from 2 months to many years. Strong feelings of disappointment, anger, resentment, and bitterness may appear if failures occur and the expected aid is not received. Outside agencies may need to leave, and some of the local community groups may weaken. Also contributing to this stage may be the gradual loss of the feeling of shared community as victims concentrate on rebuilding their own lives and solving their individual problems.

Phase 4: Reconstruction phase

Survivors come to realize they will need to solve the problems of rebuilding their own homes, businesses, farms, and lives largely by themselves and gradually assume responsibility for the tasks. This phase generally lasts for several years after the disaster. The appearance of new buildings replacing old ones, the beginnings of new construction, and the development of new programs and plans all reaffirm residents' belief in their community and their own capabilities. If these signs of progress are delayed, however, the emotional problems that appear may be serious and intense. Community groups with a longer-term investment in the community and its people become key players during this phase.

Coping Skills

- Let people help. Take advantage of people who are willing and able to help. Volunteers may sandbag or clean up debris. Relief agencies may offer food and cleaning supplies. The extra help can make a critical difference between coping and suffering.
- Take care of your physical and emotional needs. See that you and your family members eat a balanced diet to fuel your bodies. Try to get enough sleep; fatigue slows you down during an emergency and makes you prone to accidents and injury. Talk with others about your feelings and listen to theirs. Together, look for positives in the situation.
- Be patient with one another. Realize that when we suffer losses, it is natural to express disbelief, anger, sadness, anxiety, and depression afterward. Emotions and moods can be like a roller coaster. Spouses' viewpoints may differ considerably.
- Don't overlook the feelings of children as you deal with the disaster. They need to feel they can count on you for extra attention, love, and support. Reassure them, making sure they understand they are not responsible for the problems you face.
- Focus on the big picture instead of little details and little problems. Don't expect things to instantly restore themselves.
- Remember that a support network is essential. In addition to family members and friends, you may wish to speak with clergy members and

professional counselors. In some cases, you may need to refer a family member or friend for help.

- Show by words and actions that you care. A friendly arm around troubled shoulders or a few words of support can help tremendously. Offer specific types of help, or ask how you can help. Don't be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. And keep helping. Even small kind deeds mean a lot to others.
- Do not use negative coping strategies such as alcohol and drugs.

Supporting Your Family

- Tell family members when they have done a good job.
- Laugh! Laughter can help relieve tension.
- Be considerate of other family members.
- Express love and concern often.
- Exercise together.

Additional Resources

- Health and human service workers
- Clergy
- School personnel
- Financial and legal assistance agencies
- Mississippi State University Extension Service

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