

Coping Financially with Disasters

Find Information on Meeting Immediate Needs

During a disaster, information and access to resources will change frequently.

There is no single organization that will help you get through recovering from the disaster.

Here are some ways to stay up-to-date and find resources to cover needs for safety, food and water, and temporary lodging as the situation changes and new resources become available.

The Immediate Needs webpage of the federal Disaster Assistance Improvement Program has [links to Disaster Recovery Centers](#).

[Housing and food assistance can be found at the HUD Exchange.](#)

[The 2-1-1 Network helps people find local nonprofit services.](#)

Open shelters can be found at the Red Cross's [Find Open Shelters](#) page, on the [Red Cross Emergency app](#), and by calling 800-RED-CROSS (800-733-2767).

Exchanging information among family, friends, and neighbors is another way to connect to community efforts to provide essentials. You can follow local city and county elected officials on social media.

[Ready.gov gives guidance for safety before, during, and after disasters.](#)

Acknowledge the Situation to Improve Your Financial Outlook

Life can really pack a punch, and sometimes you can quickly find yourself in the midst of a terrible, unexpected situation. Humans don't like losing what they have and don't like uncertainty and change.

Dealing with loss, or even the threat of loss and an uncertain future, sends your body into your natural fight, flight, or freeze responses to get you through an overwhelming situation. The situation and your exposure and tolerance of past trauma predicts how long you remain in these states. Remembering that your stress response is normal and helpful can move you closer

to regaining perspective and improving your sense of well-being and your ability to make good decisions.

When feelings of panic or anxiety set in, take a moment to manage your breathing. The "box breath" helps bring you back to a sense of connection with yourself:

- ▶ Breathe in through your nose for a count of four.
- ▶ Hold it for four.
- ▶ Breathe out through your nose for four.
- ▶ Hold for four.
- ▶ Repeat.

"Orienting" can also bring you back to the present moment and help you regulate yourself. Slow down and name all the things you can see and feel around you until you have reconnected with yourself.

When losses are sudden and significant, it's natural to experience shock and grief. The process to accepting your new reality will take time. Be gentle on yourself as you move through the roller coaster of emotions, remembering that you are doing your best given your life path and situation. Remind yourself that this situation will not last forever and that good can be found again.

When looking for real solutions, hearing "take care of yourself" can seem basic and empty. However, internal solutions can be as powerful as external solutions. Remembering to take care of yourself so you can care for others is paramount in setting yourself up to rebuild yourself, your family, and your community. Here are some ways you can care for yourself:

- ▶ When possible, get plenty of rest, move your body, drink water, and eat as healthfully as your situation allows.
- ▶ Limit your exposure to sights and sounds of disaster to prevent replaying the trauma.
- ▶ Do as many routine things as possible.
- ▶ Make time for things you enjoy whenever possible.

Use your resources. While money is very helpful, we have more than finances to bring us through the hardest moments in our lives. Take an inventory of what has gotten you through so far—grit, physical strength, intelligence, connections, spiritual

resources, and so on. What do others value about you that can shine in this situation? Are you willing and able to allow this situation to help you grow?

Because we all value independence and self-sufficiency, you might not want to ask for help or receive help. However, sometimes we all find ourselves needing help. It is okay to ask for help and to receive it, even if it is from strangers.

[Free emotional support for those experiencing a disaster](#) can be found at the American Red Cross Disaster Recovery Emotional Health website or by calling the Red Cross Disaster Distress Helpline at 800-985-5990.

Additional Resources

[MSU Extension publication IS1697 Children Need Help Coping with Disaster](#)

[MSU Extension publication M2439 Nurturing Resilience and Healing in Children and Teens Affected by a Tornado](#)

[MSU Extension publication M2440 Coping with Stress after a Tornado](#)

[MSU Extension publication M2441 Coping with Grief after a Disaster](#)

[American Red Cross publication Taking Care of Your Emotional Health after a Disaster \(PDF\)](#)

Financial and Housing Assistance

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides disaster assistance that includes the following:

- ▶ temporary housing
- ▶ emergency home repairs
- ▶ uninsured and underinsured personal property losses
- ▶ medical, dental, and funeral expenses caused by the disaster
- ▶ other serious disaster-related expenses

FEMA is required to verify losses. This verification is done by an onsite inspection by a FEMA inspector. The loss verification process is specific to each individual situation, so different households may receive different payouts. [The average payout is \\$5,000](#). The maximum payout is \$30,000.

The standard is to get a home “safe, sanitary, and functional,” and expenses that go beyond their standard will not be paid. FEMA does not provide replacement-value amounts and does not cover nonessentials.

When renters or homeowners have property insurance, those policies will pay first. FEMA is not allowed to double-compensate, or make payments for things that insurance will pay or has paid for. If your insurance does not cover the verified damage, you may qualify for FEMA assistance to cover the gap related to the home’s habitability.

At [DisasterAssistance.gov](#), you can [get started applying for financial benefits and other forms of information and support](#) when you have experienced a disaster. Complete just one application per household.

To complete your application, you will need the following:

- ▶ Social Security numbers in your household
- ▶ information on your insurance (homeowners, renters, mobile home, auto, flood)
- ▶ description of the damage you experienced
- ▶ your total annual household income before taxes
- ▶ address of the damaged property
- ▶ your current contact information
- ▶ direct deposit information

You can use the first two sections of the [Emergency Financial First Aid Kit \(EFFAK\)](#) to gather information. [Tips on filling out the application can be found here](#).

FEMA disaster assistance is not taxable and does not impact benefits.

Plan on 10 days until deposits are made.

Unemployment Benefits

[Apply for unemployment compensation](#) with the Mississippi Department of Employment Security, if the disaster has caused you to be out of work.

Housing Counseling for Renters and Owners

A housing counselor can:

- ▶ help you develop a personalized action plan
- ▶ help you request disaster assistance from FEMA
- ▶ help you file insurance claims
- ▶ help you work with mortgage lenders
- ▶ explain mortgage relief programs
- ▶ provide financial coaching
- ▶ support successful recovery for up to 18 months through [Fannie Mae’s Disaster Response Network](#).

You can call and speak with a counselor at 877-542-9723.

Additional Resources

[FEMA document Understanding Individual Assistance and Public Assistance](#)

[Consumer Financial Protection Bureau video Your Money, Your Goals: Using the Tools](#)

[FEMA document Frequently Asked Questions About FEMA Disaster Assistance](#)

[American Red Cross publication Financial Recovery After a Disaster](#)

Cash Flow after a Disaster

Now is the time to use your emergency funds and credit to pay for necessities—food, water, gas, and temporary lodging. Do what you can to avoid taking out high-interest debt from places like pawn shops and payday loan companies, which can be very difficult and costly to pay back.

Prioritize your current expenses, trying to avoid “throwing money at it” to solve a problem and “retail therapy” to get through a difficult situation. Both strategies can work in the short run, but they can leave you in a tough spot in the long run.

When your income drops, act sooner rather than later. When you are panicked, you are more likely to make mistakes. And sometimes you go into denial and don’t make necessary changes or even make decisions you regret down road. See the section above on acknowledging the situation to help yourself avoid making issues worse.

Cut off utilities if the housing unit is not livable or completely gone.

Even though your house may be unlivable, or you cannot work to be able to earn income, consumers are still responsible for paying bills. If you do not pay your obligations, your credit is likely to be harmed.

Communicate sooner rather than later, explaining your situation to landlords, mortgage lenders, and other creditors. Mortgage and auto lenders also want to avoid foreclosure and will likely negotiate delayed payment structures or provide hardship or forbearance programs. Credit card companies sometimes waive fees and interest payments or spread out payments. Federal student loans are eligible for 90-day forbearance due to disasters.

Make sure you understand the specifics of any renegotiated terms. For example, does the new payment plan require you to

pay all the missed payments at the end of the term? Keep an eye on your credit report, making sure that lenders who agree to skipped payments do not report a missed payment.

If you are unable to work, call your employer (or have a representative call them) to understand workplace benefits and options. Find out if the organization has a disaster plan and the impact on being paid, including policies on using sick or personal leave. If you were injured on the job during the storm, will you be covered by workers’ compensation?

Additional Resources

[MSU Extension publication IS1765 Disaster Relief: Managing on a Suddenly Reduced Income](#)

[MSU Extension resource When Your Income Drops](#)

[MSU Extension publication P2432 Money Traps that Can Keep You Broke](#)

[Check your credit report free with each of the credit bureaus at least once a year at AnnualCreditReport.com.](#)

[Consumer Financial Protection Bureau document Asking Your Mortgage Lender for Help](#)

Financial Counseling and Education

The [National Foundation for Credit Counseling](#) and [Money Management International](#) are trustworthy, nonprofit organizations. They can work with you through times of distress, so that you can reevaluate and set yourself up to come out of this phase stronger financially.

You can [create your own debt repayment plan using PowerPay](#), which allows you to experiment with different ways to pay off your debt and find the quickest way where you pay the least in interest.

Remember that saving is still a priority when paying down debt; the more savings, the less you need to take on debt in the first place. Here is the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau’s [Essential Guide to Building an Emergency Fund](#).

When you are ready to learn more about improving your financial well-being, you can trust these sources. They are not selling you anything, and they’re free:

- ▶ [Consumer Finance Protection Bureau](#)
- ▶ [Financial Industry Regulatory Authority \(FINRA\)](#)
- ▶ [FDIC Money Smart](#)

Avoid Disaster Fraud

It's important to be aware of potential scams. Unfortunately, scammers look for times when people are at their most vulnerable. The Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA) reports that more than 100,000 disaster fraud complaints have been reported. They call this the "storm after the storm." That is a huge number of fraud reports, but, when you keep in mind that fraud is significantly underreported, you can see how necessary it is to be vigilant.

Everyone is susceptible. Research shows that the typical fraud victim is self-reliant when making decisions, is optimistic, has above-average financial knowledge, earns above-average income, is college-educated, and has experienced a recent life setback.

Remember the basics of identity protection and walk away if it seems "too good to be true." Report unscrupulous behavior by emailing StopFEMAFraud@fema.dhs.gov or calling the Disaster Fraud Hotline (866-720-5721) and by contacting the [Mississippi Office of the Attorney General](#) (800-281-4418).

Federal agencies do not charge for disaster assistance.

Do not provide personal information to someone unless you have verified that they represent the organization they say they do. Scammers pose as government employees, insurance agents, and private contractors. This includes "spoofing" the display on your cell phone to mimic names of government organizations or insurance companies. It is better to call those numbers directly to ensure you are dealing with the appropriate representatives.

Be extra careful with door-to-door contractors. While some might be legitimate and can help you solve problems quickly, your insurance company may require specific procedures to be followed. Get in writing the scope and cost of the work, do not pay until the work is complete, and consider buying the materials directly. Buying materials yourself will prevent a situation where the contractor takes your money but doesn't pay for the supplies ordered, leaving the supplier an option to put a lien on your property.

More information can be found in [Extension Publication IS1700 Disaster Relief: Avoiding Fraud and Deception](#) and the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau's [How can I find and work with contractors to rebuild after a disaster?](#)

If you think someone has stolen your identity and applied for FEMA relief in your name, report to the Federal Trade Commission at IdentityTheft.gov.

Additional Resources

[FEMA document Disaster Fraud](#)

[Consumer Financial Protection Bureau document How do I avoid scams and frauds after a disaster?](#)

[AARP Fraud Watch Network](#)

[Federal Trade Commission Consumer Advice page Identity Theft](#)

Document Your Losses

You will need to document losses for FEMA disaster assistance as well as for your private insurance. Take pictures of damage. Do not throw out damaged furniture or other high-priced items, because adjusters will want to see them. Keep all receipts of expenses during evacuation and recovery.

If you do not have a household inventory, you will need to do your best to create one, estimating the fair market value of damaged or destroyed items. Options include written, digital, or video/photo inventories. Here is an [example of a written checklist](#). You can download apps on your phone to complete a digital inventory.

Check with your insurance agent's office for direction before beginning the process to make sure you are following their specific procedures.

Draw a floorplan of your home and brainstorm with family and friends to help jog your memory of items you had before the disaster. Your first attempt will likely not be complete. Repeat the process after a couple of weeks to continue to add to your list.

Locate market values using internet searches and store aisles. You can [find current values of cars at sites like Kelley Blue Book](#).

Check with your bank, mortgage lender, or closing attorney for the value of your home. Estimate improvements made on your home.

If damage was done to property you inherited, check with probate courts for estimates.

Credit card statements can be used to show the value of purchased items.

File Insurance Claims

Contact your insurance agent's office for a copy of your policy so you will know what is covered. Ask for directions on filing a claim. Be aware that the process will likely take more time than you want it to. An upside of not rushing is that it allows for a fuller accounting of the damage. At the same time, you want to file your claim sooner rather than later, as claims are generally processed in the order in which they are submitted.

Plan to make a claim, even if your home or property is not covered for the type of disaster that occurred. Consequential damages might be covered.

Save all receipts. Some policies cover temporary living expenses and even advances.

Keep all paperwork and make additional copies or take photos or screenshots whenever possible.

If it is safe, make “reasonable and necessary” temporary repairs to show that you have done your best to limit damages (for example, covering holes in the roof or walls with tarps to prevent more rain damage). However, do not make extensive repairs before getting clearance from your insurance agent.

Once a claim is made, an adjuster will be scheduled to view the damage. To ensure a claim adjuster can find your property if the house or neighborhood was destroyed, make a sign with your name, street number, insurance company, and contact information. Place the sign where your house used to be.

Depending on the extent of the damage, insurance personnel may be spread very thin and may revert to “scoping the loss” rather than a full evaluation. Inquire which method is being used. You can set up a second evaluation, if needed.

Managing Large Sums of Money

If your home is well-insured, significant damage will result in large payments. If the idea of managing large sums gives you anxiety, here are a couple of things to keep in mind.

Many mortgage lenders require large insurance payments to be made out to both the homeowner and the mortgage company. This means that funds are released by the mortgage company as the work proceeds and not all at once.

If you do get a check over \$250,000, remember to spread the funds out across banks or credit unions insured by the FDIC or National Credit Union Association, respectively. While bank failures are extremely rare, the recent collapse of the Silicon Valley Bank reminded everyone that the FDIC insures up to \$250,000 per depositor, per FDIC-insured bank, for each account ownership category.

If you have a problem with an insurance company or agent, you can [file a complaint with the National Association of Insurance Commissioners](#) and/or the [Mississippi Insurance Department](#).

Additional Resources

[MSU Extension publication IS1767 Seven Steps in Making an Insurance Claim](#)

[American Red Cross publication Financial Recovery After a Disaster](#)

Replace Important Papers and Financial Documents

If a disaster strikes, you may need to provide your important documents to government agencies or other trusted helpers to apply for aid, to document losses, and to begin the recovery and rebuilding process.

If your documents are lost, here is a guide to getting replacements. If you don't have access to the internet at home or through your phone, public libraries or other organizations may have computers available to the public.

Very Important Papers

Adoption papers

Mississippi Department of Human Services
800-821-9157 or 601-359-4989

Birth certificates and death certificates

Mississippi Department of Health
Office of Vital Records
222 Marketridge Drive
Ridgeland, MS 39157
601-206-8200

<https://msdh.ms.gov/>

For other states: <http://vitalrec.com/>

[For birth records of U.S. citizens born abroad](#)

Citizenship and naturalization papers

Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services
800-375-5283

For papers related to citizenship, immigration, permanent residency (green card), re-entry permit, employment authorization, etc., visit [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services online](#). [Complete Form N-565](#). You may also contact your county courthouse.

Credit cards

Contact the issuing companies as soon as possible.

Mastercard: contact issuing financial institution

VISA: contact issuing financial institution

American Express: 1-800-441-0519

Discover: 1-800-DISCOVER (1-800-347-2683), or 1-800-347-7449 for TDD/TTY teletype services

Driver's licenses

Contact the [local driver's license bureau of the Mississippi Department of Public Safety](#).

Educational records

Contact the schools attended.

Government-issued ID

Contact the issuing authority.

Health records

Contact your personal physician's office.

Insurance policies

Contact your insurance agent or company. You may be required to complete a form, pay a fee for duplicate copies, or both. The policy number will expedite this request.

For agency addresses:

Mississippi Insurance Department
1001 Woolfolk State Office Building
501 North West Street
Jackson, MS 39201
601-359-3569

Marriage records and divorce decrees

In Mississippi:

Marriage: circuit clerk in county where the marriage occurred

Divorce: chancery clerk in county where divorce occurred

In other states, contact the [National Center for Health Statistics](#).

Military discharge papers

Department of Veterans Affairs

1-800-827-1000, or 1-800-829-4833 for TDD/TTY teletype services

Request Standard Form 180 (SF-180) from any office of the Veterans Administration, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Red Cross, a veterans' association, or a military recruiter. [You may also download SF-180 here](#).

Mortgage papers

Contact the lending institution.

Passports

[U.S. Department of State Passport Services](#)

ATTN: CLASP
U.S. Department of State
CA/PPT/S/RM/CLASP
44132 Mercure Cir
P.O. Box 1227
Sterling, VA 20166-1227

1-877-487-2778, or 1-888-874-7793 for TDD/TTY teletype services

[Form DS-64 can be downloaded here](#).

Property deeds

Contact the local circuit clerk's office.

SNAP EBT card

Call the Mississippi EBT Cardholder Service Center at 1-866-512-5087, or 1-877-906-0085 for TDD/TTY teletype services, immediately to cancel your card and prevent any possible loss of your SNAP benefits.

Social Security or Medicare card

Contact the [local Social Security office](#) or call (800) 772-1213 (1-800-325-0778 for TDD/TTY teletype services).

[Find the application for a replacement Social Security card here](#).

Stock certificates

Contact any brokerage firm (fees may be involved).

Tax records

Federal income taxes

Request Form 4506 "Copy of Tax Return" by calling 1-800-829-3676.

[Find your nearest IRS office](#) or contact your accountant or tax preparer.

Property and personal taxes

County Tax Collector's Office

P.O. Box 1033

Jackson, MS 39215-1033

601-923-7600

State income tax returns

Mississippi State Tax Commission

P.O. Box 1033

Jackson, MS 39215-1033

601-923-7700

Stocks and bonds

Contact the issuing company or your broker, who will coordinate with their transfer agent for a 2–3% fee.

Call 304-480-7527 or [download and complete FS Form 1048, Claim for Lost, Stolen, or Destroyed U.S. Savings Bonds \(PDF\)](#)

Titles to deeds

Contact the local circuit clerk's office.

Vehicle titles

Mississippi State Tax Commission

Ask for Form 78006, Application for Replacement Certificate of Title.

601-923-7200

Or contact the county tax collector's office.

Will

Contact the attorney who prepared it.

What to Do with Your New Documents

When you receive your replacement documents, make photocopies of them. Keep the copies of your confidential records in a safe place (locked fireproof box) with a family member or a friend you can trust who lives in a location at least 100 miles away from your home.

Keep your originals in a very safe place. Rent a safe deposit box at your bank or buy a fireproof box to keep them in at home. Store your fireproof box in a place where you can easily grab it if you need to leave home quickly in an emergency.

Financial Decisions after a Loved One's Death

Losing someone you love is one of the most difficult challenges life presents. Having to figure out the after-life decisions, especially during a disaster, is very difficult.

Here is some information to help smooth out the process:

- ▶ Unless a person dies in a hospital or in hospice, you will need to find a medical professional to make a pronouncement of death. You can locate one by calling 911.
- ▶ You or the funeral home needs to file a [death certificate with the Mississippi Department of Health](#) as soon as possible. Request at least 10 copies, as several copies will be needed to close bank accounts, file insurance claims, and register the death with government agencies. You will need more copies if the financial value of the deceased person's estate is large.
- ▶ Call the deceased loved one's lawyer, insurance agent, CPA, financial planner, or other financial advisers.
- ▶ Go to the department of motor vehicles office to cancel the deceased loved one's driver's license.
- ▶ Contact all credit bureaus and credit card companies. Sadly, the deceased are common targets of identity theft. Reduce your risk of having to fight identity theft in addition to handling end-of-life matters for a loved one by canceling anything a scammer could use.
- ▶ [Forward mail](#) to the person who is handling the affairs of the deceased. The mail is a practical way to see assets, bills, and subscriptions.
- ▶ If possible, locate documentation the deceased left with end-of-life instructions and wishes for a funeral or other service. A bank safe deposit box may be a good place to look for these documents. Work with the executor to begin the process of probating the will.
- ▶ Contact the deceased loved one's employer to arrange for payment of any employment benefits, funeral payment, back pay, bonuses, vacation pay, expense reimbursement, or other pay owed.
- ▶ If the funeral home does not contact the Social Security Administration, you will need to go to a Social Security office or call 800-772-1213 to report the death and arrange for any death benefit and/or spousal or child support.
- ▶ If your loved one was a veteran, contact the Department of Veterans Affairs at 800-827-1000 for any burial assistance or other benefits.
- ▶ If needed, contact utility companies and cancel subscriptions and services, doctor's appointments, and in-home service visits.
- ▶ File life insurance claims as soon as possible.

Additional Resources

[AARP document What to Do When a Loved One Dies](#)

[Social Security Administration document Survivors Benefits](#)

[Social Security Administration publication How Social Security Can Help You When a Family Member Dies \(PDF\)](#)

Giving Financially

A natural response to seeing others suffer is wanting to help. Here are a few tips to ensure your gifts get to those who need them.

Giving money rather than items is an efficient way to give, and it allows organizations on the ground to buy what they need as conditions change. However, you want to avoid disaster relief charity scams, where scammers pose as representatives of charities seeking donations for disaster relief. Donate only to trusted charities.

There are organizations that can help you verify the legitimacy of charities. In Mississippi, check with the [Charities Division of the Mississippi Secretary of State](#). Check nationally here: [Better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Alliance](#), [Charity Navigator](#), [Charity Watch](#), and [GuideStar](#).

Do not open suspicious emails. Do not click on links in emails from people or organizations you don't know. It is better to go to websites yourself rather than clicking on a possibly fraudulent link in an email.

Verify all phone numbers by checking the organization's official website. If you are using text-to-donate, make sure you have the correct number.

Organizations on the ground supporting Mississippians recovering from the 2023 tornadoes include:

[Samaritan's Purse](#)

[Cajun Navy](#)

[Volunteer Mississippi](#)

[GoFundMe Mississippi Tornadoes](#)

[American Red Cross](#)

[United Way of West Central Mississippi](#)

Additional Resources

[Consumer Financial Protection Bureau document Helping Others Rebuild](#)

References

[American Red Cross publication Picking Up the Pieces After a Disaster \(PDF\)](#)

[American Red Cross resource Recovering Financially: Financial Recovery After a Disaster](#)

[Consumer Financial Protection Bureau resource Dealing with Disasters and Emergencies](#)

[Federal Communications Commission resource After Storms, Watch Out for Scams](#)

[Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation resource What to Do When Facing a Natural Disaster](#)

[FINRA Investor Education Foundation resource Understanding and Combating Financial Fraud](#)

[U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission resource Investor.gov: Lost or Stolen Stock Certificates](#)

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Note: Find this publication online at extension.msstate.edu/publications for links to additional resources.

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