

Recovering from a Disaster: Emotional Care for Adults

Disasters often strike with little or no warning. In an instant your home and community can be damaged or destroyed and forever changed. Even if your home or business does not suffer directly, no one who experiences a disaster is untouched by it.

For many, a disaster continues as a very real presence even long after it has passed. Feelings of sadness, depression, frustration, anger and anxiety are common. It is not unusual for these feelings to last for many months. Learning to recognize the normal reactions and emotions that occur can help you better understand these feelings and become more comfortable and effective in coping with them.

The following information explains the range of feelings and behaviors you can expect and how you, your family, friends and neighbors can best help yourselves and each other during this time of recovery. Suggestions for coping with the aftermath are offered throughout this handout.

Why do I feel the way I do?

The loss of or damage to your home, property and personal belongings has set into motion weeks and even months of effort to recover and rebuild. While physical property and possessions are initial concerns that consume your time and energy, emotional reactions to disasters are often pushed aside or ignored.

It is very common for people to experience a wide range of emotional reactions to a disaster. These reactions are experienced through thoughts, feelings, and actions and are often very upsetting to you and those around you.

However, it is extremely important to remember that they are *normal* reactions to an *abnormal* event. You have been through an exceptionally stressful situation and these emotional reactions may continue for many months following the disaster.

Things to look for

YOUR BEHAVIORS

- Having problems falling or staying asleep
- Isolating yourself or withdrawing from others
- Keeping excessively busy and preoccupied to avoid the unpleasant effects of the disaster

- At times, becoming overly alert or easily startled
- Avoiding activities, places, or even people that remind you of the disaster
- Experiencing more conflicts or tension with family members or other people/more anger
- Crying easily or becoming tearful for no apparent reason
- Experiencing an increase or decrease in your normal appetite
- Drinking alcoholic beverages more often

YOUR FEELINGS

- “Just not yourself,” out of balance, or easily upset
- Loss of interest in everyday activities
- A sense of despair, hopelessness or emptiness about the future
- Anxiety or fear, especially when things remind you of the disaster
- Irritability, shortness of temper, or anger and resentment
- Depression, sadness, or feeling down much of the time

YOUR THOUGHTS

- Trouble concentrating or remembering things
- Difficulty with making decisions
- Frequent replaying of the events and circumstances of the disaster in your mind
- Recurring dreams or nightmares about the disaster
- Questioning of your spiritual or religious beliefs

What can I expect?

There are many concerns, adjustments and ordeals that follow the experience of a disaster. Generally, within a short time there is the reality of financial setbacks and the loss of property and personal possessions. The endless adjustments that you and your family must make will put additional stress on your relationships and daily living. You

may also grow physically and mentally weary from the enormous task of cleaning up and rebuilding. All of these factors can hinder your ability to move forward.

In the aftermath of a disaster, it is important to remember that it will take time to heal and recover from the emotional effects of the event.

However, with the passing of time, your efforts to cope will begin to reduce the intensity and duration of these reactions and behaviors.

How to cope and what works

FOR YOURSELF

- Talk to others about how you are feeling. It is important to talk about your experiences. You need to express sadness, grief, anger and fears over what has happened and what you face.
- Don't overwork yourself. Take time off from repairs to be with your family. Take time for recreation, relaxation or a favorite hobby.
- Do not let yourself become isolated. Seek out and maintain connections with your community, friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers, or people who attend your place of worship. Talk about your experiences with them.
- Pay close attention to your physical health, as prolonged stress takes its toll on your body. Maintain a good diet and make sure you are getting enough sleep. It is also helpful to be physically active or exercise.
- Upsetting times can cause some people to use alcohol or drugs to cope with the stress. It does not help in the long run and will likely cause other problems.

FOR YOUR FAMILY

- Families should keep some routines in place such as regular meals, certain enjoyable activities and other family rituals. This will help you feel as though life has some sense of order and normalcy.
- Couples should take time to be alone, as a couple, to talk about how you are feeling and to have fun together.
- Take time to talk with children about their experience. Listen to what they have to say and let them freely express their feelings. This is a confusing and frightening time for them. Remember that children do not have the same level of coping or understanding that you have.

- Moving back home (once it is repaired)—Moving back into the family home can bring mixed emotions such as relief and joy as well as sadness and fear. These are normal feelings and reactions. Sadness is often due to the reminders of things that were lost or destroyed. Feelings of fear and anxiety are common upon returning to the location that was invaded and damaged by the disaster.
- Seasonal events—During the first year following a disaster, many calendar events such as birthdays, holidays and the change of seasons can arouse emotions such as sadness and distress. It is normal for certain events to remind you of “how things used to be” and of things that were changed or lost. Recovery and healing involves letting yourself grieve the loss of these things.
- Your health—As you endure long-term stress, your health can be adversely affected. It is common for people to have headaches, stomach or intestinal problems, colds, infections and allergies more frequently. In addition, preexisting medical conditions such as heart problems and high blood pressure may be exacerbated by the prolonged stress.
- Final note—If stress, anxiety, depression, or physical problems increase, persist, or interfere with your regular activities, you should consult a physician or a mental health professional.

Disaster Distress Helpline: 800-985-5990

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255

More questions? Contact Nikoleta at Nikoleta.Boukydis@cityofchicago.org

