

Recovering from a Disaster: Emotional Care for Older 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.

As an older adult, you probably have many of these reactions and feelings; however, some may be different or intensified. It is important to ask for support when you need it.

The following information explains the range of feelings and behaviors you can expect and how you, your 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.

Common Feelings

Current losses can trigger memories or feelings associated with prior losses. After a disaster you may experience the following:

Fear of dependency or lack of self-sufficiency

Worry about limited financial resources and time to rebuild

Fear of institutionalization

Fear of a decline in health and mobility

Fear of inability to rebuild your home

Common Reactions

Withdrawing and/or isolating yourself from family and friends

Concealing the full extent of the disaster's impact

No longer caring to rebuild or start over—apathy

Experiencing confusion or disorientation

Having a decline in physical health

Not making use of available resources

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

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.

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

- 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.

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 or call the telephone number listed in this brochure.

Disaster Distress Helpline: 800-985-5990

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255

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