

Dealing with Stress After a Crisis or Natural Disaster

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A natural disaster, such as flooding or a major storm, often leaves altered schedules, property damage or major losses in its wake. Many times, it also leaves individuals with frustration and stress. In addition to restoring buildings or replacing material possessions after a disaster, people may need to spend time managing their stress and rebuilding overall health and balance.

Recognizing Signs of Stress in families

Families typically experience stress during times of crisis or natural disaster. They may need to respond to damage to home or other property, move out of affected areas for a time, or deal with personal losses. Signs of stress in families are like the warning lights on the dashboard of a vehicle—they indicate a need to slow down and take steps to restore normal functioning.

Some signs of stress in families that are common during a natural disaster include:

- Limited time to spend with each other.
- Sense of frustration or being overwhelmed
- A desire to return to normal activities and routines
- Limited time or energy to relax
- Lack of time for conversations, or conversations that focus mostly on time and tasks rather than people and feelings
- Intensive arguments, bickering or impatience with each other
- Little time for shared meals, games or connecting activities
- Rushing around from place to place, task to task
- Withdrawal or escape into work or other activities
- Isolation in a room or avoidance of tasks

In the midst of such stresses, it is often helpful to focus on the present and work on the differing setbacks facing you and others, both large and small. Only more stress will result if you spend time wondering “what might have been” or “if only we did this,” as such views are focused on the past and things out of one’s control.

Tips for Stress Management Related to Disaster

- Be extra patient with yourself and others.
- Take a little time to assess and determine what's really important. Remember also that a spouse's, partner's or child's view on what is important or a top priority may differ from yours.
- If you have property damage or losses, do not expect that things will be restored right away. Accept that both physical and emotional repairs and restoration take time.
- Realize that disaster victims experience losses and related frustration or grief. It is natural for those affected to express disbelief, anger, sadness, anxiety and depression during or after a disaster.
- Be aware that the emotions of those affected can go through ups and downs. Moods and feelings can shift unexpectedly, for example, going from appreciation for assistance to sadness at damage to a personal item. Emotional ups and downs are normal.
- Don't overlook the feelings of children affected by the situation. Children and youths need to feel they can count on you for needed attention, love and support during and after a crisis or disaster.
- Give reassurance and comfort to children and other family members. Help them understand that working together and reaching for support is helpful in managing stresses.
- Be attentive to the health of family members. Keep everyone's diet as nourishing as possible in the circumstances. Also, get rest and relaxation when possible.
- Keep an eye on the big picture rather than little problems. Instead of focusing on little details and problems, refocus on a healthy overall perspective and moving forward.
- Talk with friends, family members, counselors or other helping professionals. In a crisis or disaster situation, a supportive network is essential and helps you to be resilient and bounce back from stresses.
- Provide help to others when possible. Giving service can help you feel better and more in control of the situation.
- Avoid resorting to bad habits when feeling stressed out. While this is a common tendency, more problems are likely to arise if you resort to blaming, denial, alcohol misuse, smoking, overeating or angry outbursts.
- Develop a wellness plan to help in managing individual and family stresses. Focus on two or three things you can do each day to manage and improve health, such as exercise, mindful breathing, doing a hobby or talking with someone.
- Focus on getting sufficient, restful sleep. Lack of sleep will increase stress concerns.
- Make a list of priority needs or actions. List items that need to be done first, second and so on. This approach helps you focus on completing tasks that cannot be put off and require immediate action or attention, while allowing others to be done later.
- Learn to focus on the things you can control and accept the things you cannot control. Many things in a crisis or natural disaster are beyond our control. Accept that some things cannot be controlled and conserve your emotional energy for things you can control.
- Cultivate a positive mindset. While problems come, time and effort can help you to work through challenges. A person's mindset and a positive reaction to events helps to overcome stresses and regain stability and balance.

Resources

For more details about dealing with stress and other information to aid in disaster response and recovery, visit the NDSU Extension disaster response Web site at: <https://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/ag-topics/disasters>

Based on and adapted from information developed by Clemson Cooperative Extension following Hurricane Hugo (2000); Virginia Cooperative Extension; "Dealing with Stress After a Disaster," Cornell Cooperative Extension (2000); and "Dealing with Stress After a Disaster," LSU AgCenter (2005).

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