



FLOODS: PREPARATION AND WORKPLACE RECOVERY



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Introduction

This handbook contains articles for those who were impacted by a flood, including information on cleaning up and coping with the aftermath of trauma.

Managers

The articles in this handbook can help you to effectively lead your employees through a crisis such as a flood and help you to identify what to expect from employees after they have faced such a disaster. It also includes articles for employees who have been affected by the flood. Please feel free distribute the articles to your staff.

Employees

Please use the materials in this handbook as a starting point on your road to recovery. Information about cleaning up after the flood, rebuilding your life, helping your child(ren) cope with the disaster and taking care of your mental health are included.

Managers: Stay Focused in the Workplace During a Disaster

A disaster such as a hurricane, act of violence or toxic spill creates unique challenges for managers. Emotional stress, physical injury, grief, loss of property, and disruption of daily activities can rob managers of their time, energy and productivity. At the same time, managers are often called upon to provide comfort, stability and reassurance to their employees while dealing with their own emotions and stressors. As a result, staying focused is very challenging.

Post-disaster challenges—at work and at home

At the workplace, much of the suffering and stress associated with a disaster happens after the event. At first glance it might seem that the workplace is the one part of life that could offer a sense of normalcy and security. Getting back to work can provide employees with a sense of structure and manageability when life around them may be falling apart. But it can never fully mitigate the anxiety and stress associated with their personal suffering.

Worries about family, job security and disaster-related injury or illness make it difficult to maintain focus and productivity. Disasters usually create a larger workload and longer hours for managers in order to restore operations. Repairing equipment and revamping systems is one thing, but restoring a sense of safety and stability amid uncertainty can be a daunting challenge. Managers are frequently torn between their loyalty to their families and their responsibility to their workplace.

First things first

A manager, like any leader, is human. When worries and fears preoccupy your thoughts and affect your emotions, you are ineffective in your job. Remember that disasters are equal opportunity events that decimate whatever and whoever is in their way.

In the wake of a disaster managers must be emotionally and mentally stable in order to execute their responsibilities and provide support for their staff. If you need help dealing with the emotional effects of a disaster, get it.

Talk with loved ones, colleagues, trusted friends or clergy. Do whatever it takes to regain your balance. Your family and your employees will look to you for reassurance and stability. If you are feeling overwhelmed, call the employee assistance program (EAP) and talk with someone. EAP counselors have the expertise and resources to help you and your family through the storm.

Expect that employees will need time for personal issues

Some employees are so preoccupied with personal issues associated with disaster that they are unfocused and their work performance suffers. They often need to take extra vacation and sick time to oversee restoration of their homes or care for loved ones. It is no wonder that employers find their resources are stretched to the max in the aftermath of a disaster.

Prevent overwork and exhaustion

After an initial crisis, extra work is often necessary. It is important to prevent overwork and exhaustion because fatigue decreases alertness, impairs judgment, and can make people more vulnerable to accidents. You may need to temporarily revise work schedules and rest times until the impact of the disaster wanes significantly.

Employees who are stressed and anxious often make rash decisions that alleviate immediate distress but in the long run are counter-productive. Deciding to quit or to move away are common responses to disasters.



Allow time for your employees to talk with you or an employee assistance professional to help them sort through the stress and adversity they face. You don't have to have the answers, but be willing to listen and ask them how you can help them get through the immediate crisis. Often just a few small accommodations are all that is necessary to relieve an immediate concern. Encourage them. Tell them how much you value their contribution to the organization. Sometimes people just need to hear that they are valued and their work is appreciated.

Most people are resilient and will recover from the disaster. It just takes time. Good managers know their staff and are dialed in to changes in behavior and attitude. When in doubt about how an employee is doing, simply ask him or her.

Sources: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress; Uniformed Services University School of Medicine; Federal Emergency Management Agency, <http://www.fema.gov/rebuild/recover/cope.shtm>

By Drew W. Edwards, EdD
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What to Do and What to Expect: Suggestions for Managers and Supervisors Following Terrorism or Other Trauma

What to expect

Expect things to get worse before they get better. When terror or disaster strikes, people are immediately concerned with their own safety and that of their families. After the safety of those close to them is assured, people begin to feel the impact of the event in their own way. For some people, this means re-prioritizing the role of work and family in their lives; for others this may mean relying on negative coping strategies, like excessive use of alcohol or drugs. Constant news coverage of the event keeps pictures and fears fresh in people's minds, making returning to daily routines more difficult.

Employees may feel depressed, anxious or stressed. These feelings might be seen as physical ailments or emotional expressions. Depression, anxiety and stress are the most common complaints of people who have experienced a terrifying event. People express these emotions through their behavior and language. While some employees may talk about their feelings, others may reveal these feelings as illnesses.

Employees want to get back to work—but at their own pace. Recovering from a terrifying event is an individual process. People who have experienced a tragedy want to return to daily life. How quickly an individual is able to return to their daily routine will depend upon his own prior experiences, the proximity of the terrifying event to himself and the support available.

Increases in turnover, absenteeism, requests for vacation leave and impulsive behavior are typical in the first six months following a tragic event. The first six months following a tragic event are those months in which most employees react. This reaction may be seen as increases in turnover and requests for vacation time as employees re-evaluate their life priorities, absenteeism in people who do not feel safe at work, and impulsive behavior as people "live each day like it's the last."

Increases in stress, concentration difficulties and use of drugs and alcohol can last for up to a year. The natural recovery process can last for up to a year. During this yearlong period, employees may feel stress as they balance the demands of work, family, financial and personal needs. Employees may be distracted and unable to concentrate or communicate clearly. Individuals who have relied on drugs or alcohol as coping strategies may begin to experience negative effects related to their use.

What to do

Be available to your staff. Allow your staff the opportunity to talk with you—and be ready to listen.

Understand that employees will have a difficult time returning to normal and that "normal" may change. As employees come to accept the outcome of the tragic events, their life priorities and abilities will change. Understand that for some employees—and for some workplaces—life will never be exactly the same as it was before.

Monitor workplace safety issues. When trauma results in the death or illness of people who were at work, work no longer feels like a safe place to be. Employees will have higher expectations for workplace security and will want assurances that the workplace is safe. Difficulty concentrating, sleeping, or drug and alcohol use can impair workers from performing at their best and safest.

Be sensitive to employees' needs to put family and self first following a tragic event. Employees need to have permission to think about their own needs and the needs of their families following a tragic event. The needs of the workplace are not as immediately important to an individual who has experienced trauma. Managers who recognize that employees need time to have other priorities besides work gain employee loyalty, and employees are ready to return to work sooner than when not supported.



Let your employees take action. When tragedy strikes, feeling helpless can be immobilizing. Allow employees to take action—whether that means taking a collection for a charity or a demonstration of patriotism.

Build your credibility and reputation for being a leader by identifying work priorities and how your team is functioning. How you manage your team through a tragic event will have a lasting impact on the bottom line. Offering your staff the opportunity to show feelings and take action builds cohesiveness among team members and creates a stronger work environment.

Use your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Your Employee Assistance Program is available to help you or individual employees address personal concerns about the tragic events and help you in creating a plan to cope effectively with concerns. The Employee Assistance Program is also available to offer critical incident debriefing counseling. The central feature of most critical incident debriefings is a group meeting involving affected employees. It is generally advised that all employees of the given work group or section participate in this group meeting, even if some of these employees were not present at the time of the traumatic incident (or directly involved in the incident). This is done because experience has shown that such a framework best fosters a sense of workplace community surrounding the traumatic event, and that this feeling of community in turn is one of the most critical restorative ingredients in transcending the effects of the trauma.

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How EAP Consultants Can Help Managers

From stress on the job to health and wellness and performance-related issues, employee assistance program (EAP) consultants help managers lower absenteeism, decrease tardiness, reduce health care costs, improve safety records and retain valuable employees.

Managers are encouraged to use appropriate internal resources and refer to their company's internal policies and procedures to make sure they are using approved practices. After they've talked with their human resources experts and in conjunction with having accessed all internal company resources, managers can turn to EAP consultants, who can assess the problem, provide consultation, identify external resources and refer managers to professional service providers when appropriate.

Many problems can be handled during a phone consultation. Articles and checklists on this site can help managers prepare for and facilitate an EAP referral.

When to ask for help

If one of your employees shows a change in behavior, such as poor work performance, difficulty concentrating, irritability, tardiness or excessive absence, there may be stresses in her personal life. Perhaps she's struggling with finding child care resources after moving to a new neighborhood, or is coping suddenly with an elderly parent who's ill. She may be dealing with a substance-abuse problem or a case of domestic violence.

Your EAP consultant will talk with you about the history of the problem and any dips in work performance that you've documented. The consultant will coach you on how to approach the employee in a non-confrontational style. It's always best for the manager to take the employee aside privately and discuss job performance or attendance in a straightforward manner, asking if anything is wrong, rather than jumping to conclusions or making accusations. The manager then can weave information about EAP services into the discussion.

While EAP consultants can't solve your workplace problems, they can facilitate resolution of the issues that cause or impact these problems. The goal is to deal with a work-performance or personal problem before it escalates to a safety issue or an incident of workplace violence.

On-site consultations

Sometimes EAP consultants come on-site if there is conflict between departments or co-workers. They meet with supervisors and management teams to facilitate teambuilding workshops that can increase organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Another time EAP consultants sometimes are asked to come on-site is during layoffs or terminations. While EAP consultants can't notify employees of layoffs, they can support managers during this difficult time and provide coping skills.

These situations sometimes are as stressful for the managers who have to deliver the bad news as for the employees receiving the news. Whatever the situation, EAP consultants want to be sure that managers maintain their objectivity and that they take care of themselves before, during and after.

EAP consultants are prepared to work with you to bring balance to your workplace.

By Rosalyn Kulick
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What to Do Before and During a Flood

Before a flood

To prepare for a flood, you should:

- Avoid building in a floodplain unless you elevate and reinforce your home.
- Elevate the furnace, water heater and electric panel if susceptible to flooding.
- Install "check valves" in sewer traps to prevent flood water from backing up into the drains of your home.
- Construct barriers (levees, beams, floodwalls) to stop floodwater from entering the building.
- Seal walls in basements with waterproofing compounds to avoid seepage.

During a flood

If a flood is likely in your area, you should:

- Listen to the radio or television for information.
- Be aware that flash flooding can occur. If there is any possibility of a flash flood, move immediately to higher ground. Do not wait for instructions to move.
- Be aware of streams, drainage channels, canyons and other areas known to flood suddenly. Flash floods can occur in these areas with or without such typical warnings as rain clouds or heavy rain.

If you must prepare to evacuate, you should do the following:

- Secure your home. If you have time, bring in outdoor furniture. Move essential items to an upper floor.
- Turn off utilities at the main switches or valves if instructed to do so. Disconnect electrical appliances. Do not touch electrical equipment if you are wet or standing in water.

If you have to leave your home, remember these evacuation tips:

- Do not walk through moving water. Six inches of moving water can make you fall. If you have to walk in water, walk where the water is not moving. Use a stick to check the firmness of the ground in front of you.
- Do not drive into flooded areas. If floodwaters rise around your car, abandon the car and move to higher ground if you can do so safely. You and the vehicle can be quickly swept away.

Driving in floods facts

The following are important points to remember when driving in flood conditions:

- Six inches of water will reach the bottom of most passenger cars causing loss of control and possible stalling.
- A foot of water will float many vehicles.
- Two feet of rushing water can carry away most vehicles including sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and pick-up trucks.

Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency, www.fema.gov/hazard/flood/fl_before.shtml



Pets and Disasters

Make arrangements for your pets as part of your household disaster planning. If you must evacuate your home, it's always best to take your pets with you. For health and space reasons, pets will not be allowed in public emergency shelters. If, as a last resort, you have to leave your pets behind, make sure you have a plan to ensure their care.

Before

Contact your local animal shelter, humane society, veterinarian or emergency management office for information on caring for pets in an emergency. Find out if there will be any shelters set up to take pets in an emergency. Also, see if your veterinarian will accept your pet in an emergency.

Decide on safe locations in your house where you could leave your pet in an emergency:

- Consider easy-to-clean areas such as utility areas or bathrooms and rooms with access to a supply of fresh water.
- Avoid choosing rooms with hazards such as windows, hanging plants or pictures in large frames.
- In case of flooding, the location should have access to high counters that pets can escape to.
- Set up two separate locations if you have dogs and cats.

Buy a pet carrier that allows your pet to stand up and turn around inside. Train your pet to become comfortable with the carrier. Use a variety of training methods such as feeding it in the carrier or placing a favorite toy or blanket inside.

If your pet is on medication or a special diet, find out from your veterinarian what you should do in case you have to leave it alone for several days. Try to get an extra supply of medications.

Include an identification tag that has your name, address, and phone number.

If your dog normally wears a chain link "choker" collar, have a leather or nylon collar available if you have to leave him alone for several days.

Keep your pet's shots current and know where the records are. Most kennels require proof of current rabies and distemper vaccinations before accepting a pet.

Contact motels and hotels in communities outside of your area and find out if they will accept pets in an emergency.

When assembling emergency supplies for the household, include items for pets:

- extra food (The food should be dry and relatively unappealing to prevent overeating. Store the food in sturdy containers.)
- kitty litter
- large capacity self-feeder and water dispenser
- extra medications

Trained guide dogs



In most states, trained guide dogs for the blind, hearing impaired or handicapped will be allowed to stay in emergency shelters with their owners. Check with local emergency management officials for more information.

During

Bring your pets inside immediately. Animals have instincts about severe weather changes and will often isolate themselves if they are afraid. Bringing them inside early can stop them from running away. Never leave a pet outside or tied up during a storm.

If you evacuate and have to leave your pet at home, prepare a safe location for it:

- Leave familiar items such as the pet's normal bedding and favorite toys.
- Leave a two- or three-day supply of dry food, even if it's not the pet's usual food. The food should not be moistened because it can turn rancid or sour. Leave the food in a sturdy container that the pet cannot overturn.
- Leave water in a sturdy, no-spill container. If possible, open a faucet slightly and let the water drip into a big container. Large dogs may be able to obtain fresh water from a partially filled bathtub.
- Replace a chain link "choker" collar with a leather or nylon collar. Make sure the collar has tags and identification.
- Separate dogs and cats. Even if your dogs and cats normally get along, the anxiety of an emergency situation can cause pets to act irrationally.
- Keep small pets away from cats and dogs.

If you evacuate and plan to take your pets, remember to bring your pet's medical records and medicines with your emergency supplies.

Birds

Birds must eat daily to survive. In an emergency, you may have to leave your birds behind. Talk with your veterinarian or local pet store about special food dispensers that regulate the amount of food a bird is given. Make sure that the bird is caged and the cage is covered by a thin cloth or sheet to provide security and filtered light.

After

If after a disaster you have to leave town, take your pets with you. Pets are unlikely to survive on their own.

In the first few days after the disaster, leash your pets when they go outside. Always maintain close contact. Familiar scents and landmarks may be altered and your pet may become confused and lost. Also, snakes and other dangerous animals may be brought into the area with flood areas. Downed power lines are a hazard.

The behavior of your pets may change after an emergency. Normally quiet and friendly pets may become aggressive or defensive. Watch animals closely. Leash dogs and place them in a fenced yard with access to shelter and water.

Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency, <http://www.fema.gov/kids/pets.htm>



After a Flood: The First Steps

Your home has been flooded. Although floodwaters may be down in some areas, many dangers still exist. Here are some things to remember in the days ahead.

- Roads may still be closed because they have been damaged or are covered by water. Barricades have been placed for your protection. If you come upon a barricade or a flooded road, go another way.
- Keep listening to the radio for news about what to do, where to go, or places to avoid.
- Emergency workers will be assisting people in flooded areas. You can help them by staying off the roads and out of the way.
- If you must walk or drive in areas that have been flooded:
 - Stay on firm ground. Moving water only 6 inches deep can sweep you off your feet. Standing water may be electrically charged from underground or downed power lines.
 - Flooding may have caused familiar places to change. Floodwaters often erode roads and walkways. Flood debris may hide animals and broken bottles, and it's also slippery. Avoid walking or driving through it.
- Play it safe. Additional flooding or flash floods can occur. Listen for local warnings and information. If your car stalls in rapidly rising waters, get out immediately and climb to higher ground.

Staying healthy

A flood can cause emotional and physical stress. You need to look after yourself and your family as you focus on cleanup and repair.

- Rest often and eat well.
- Keep a manageable schedule. Make a list and do jobs one at a time.
- Discuss your concerns with others and seek help. Contact your employee assistance program or the Red Cross for information on emotional support available in your area.

Getting help

- The American Red Cross can help you by providing you with a voucher to purchase new clothing, groceries, essential medications, bedding, essential furnishings, and other items to meet emergency needs. Listen to the radio to find out where to go for assistance, or look up American Red Cross in the phone book and call.
- The Red Cross can provide you with a cleanup kit: mop, broom, bucket, and cleaning supplies.
- Contact your insurance agent to discuss claims.
- Listen to your radio for information on assistance that may be provided by the state or federal government or other organizations.
- If you hire cleanup or repair contractors, be sure they are qualified to do the job. Be wary of people who drive through neighborhoods offering help in cleaning up or repairing your home. Check references.



Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency, www.fema.gov/hazard/flood/aftrfld.shtm

Clean Up Safely After a Natural Disaster

When returning to your home after a hurricane, protect yourself and your family by following these tips.

Reentering buildings

- Stay away from damaged buildings or structures until they have been examined and certified as safe by a building inspector or other government authority. You may want to wait to return to buildings during daylight hours, when it is easier to avoid hazards, particularly if the electricity is off and you have no lights.
- Leave immediately if you hear shifting or unusual noises that signal that the structure may fall or if you smell gas or suspect a leak. If you smell gas, notify emergency authorities and do not turn on the lights, light matches, smoke, or do anything that could cause a spark. Do not return to the house until you are told it is safe to do so.
- Keep children and pets out of the affected area until cleanup has been completed.

General safety measures

- Have at least two fire extinguishers, each with a UL rating of at least 10A, at every cleanup job.
- Wear hard hats, goggles, heavy work gloves, and watertight boots with steel toe and insole (not just steel shank) for cleanup work.
- Wear earplugs or protective headphones to reduce risk from equipment noise.
- Use teams of two or more people to move bulky objects. Avoid lifting any material that weighs more than 50 pounds (per person).
- When using a chain saw, operate the saw according to the manufacturer's instructions, wear appropriate protective equipment, avoid contact with power lines, be sure that bystanders are at a safe distance, and take extra care in cutting trees or branches that have gotten bent or caught under another object. Use extreme caution to avoid electrical shock when using an electric chain saw.
- If there has been a backflow of sewage into your house, wear rubber boots, rubber gloves, and goggles during cleanup of the affected area.
- In hot weather, try to stay cool by staying in air-conditioned buildings, taking breaks in shaded areas or in cool rooms, drinking water and nonalcoholic fluids often, and wearing light and loose-fitting clothing. Do outdoor activities during cooler hours.

Carbon monoxide exposure

Never use generators, pressure washers, or other gasoline, propane, natural gas, or charcoal-burning devices inside your home, basement, garage, or camper—or even outside near an open window, door, or vent. Carbon monoxide—an odorless, colorless gas from these sources that can cause sudden illness and death—can build up indoors and poison the people and animals inside.

Mold and cleanup

- Remove and discard items that cannot be washed and disinfected (such as mattresses, carpeting, carpet padding, rugs, upholstered furniture, cosmetics, stuffed animals, baby toys, pillows, foam-rubber items, books, wall coverings and paper products).



- Remove and discard drywall and insulation that has been contaminated with sewage or flood waters.
- Thoroughly clean all hard surfaces (such as flooring, concrete, molding, wood and metal furniture, countertops, appliances, sinks, and other plumbing fixtures) with hot water and laundry or dish detergent.
- If electrical circuits and electrical equipment have gotten wet or are in or near water, turn off the power at the main breaker or fuse on the service panel. If you must enter standing water to access the main power switch, then call an electrician to turn it off.
- Never turn power on or off or use an electric tool or appliance while standing in water.
- Do not connect generators to your home's electrical circuits without the approved, automatic-interrupt devices. If a generator is on line when electrical service is restored, it can become a major fire hazard and it may endanger line workers helping to restore power in your area.

Hazardous materials issues

- Call the fire department to inspect or remove chemicals, propane tanks, and other dangerous materials.
- Wear protective clothing and gear (for example, a respirator if needed) when handling hazardous materials.
- Wash skin that may have come in contact with hazardous materials.
- Wear insulated gloves and use caution if you have to remove a car battery. Avoid any acid that may have leaked from a car battery.

Hygiene and infectious disease issues

- After completing the cleanup, wash with soap and water. If there is a boil-water advisory in effect, use water that has been boiled for 1 minute (allow the water to cool before washing). Or you may use water that has been disinfected for personal hygiene use (solution of 1/8 teaspoon of household bleach per 1 gallon of water). Let it stand for 30 minutes. If the water is cloudy, use a solution of 1/4 teaspoon of household bleach per 1 gallon of water.
- If you have any open cuts or sores that were exposed to floodwater, wash them with soap and water and apply an antibiotic ointment to discourage infection.
- Seek immediate medical attention if you become injured or ill.
- Wash all clothes worn during the cleanup in hot water and detergent. These clothes should be washed separately from uncontaminated clothes and linens.

Water issues

- If the building is flooded, the waters may contain fecal material from overflowing sewage systems and agricultural and industrial waste. Although skin contact with floodwater does not, by itself, pose a serious health risk, there is risk of disease from eating or drinking anything contaminated with floodwater.
- If you have any open cuts or sores that will be exposed to floodwater, keep them as clean as possible by washing them with soap and applying an antibiotic ointment to discourage infection.
- To reduce cold-related risks when standing or working in water which is cooler than 75° F (24° C), wear insulated clothes and insulated rubber boots, take frequent breaks out of the water, and change into dry clothing when possible.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/cleanup/facts.asp



Support for Disaster Responders

National disasters have raised many questions about the emotional health of those workers who are called upon to respond.

Nothing can prepare someone for the intensity of a large-scale disaster. These catastrophes thrust first responders, maintenance, utility workers and clean-up crews into life-and-death situations, disorganization, death, confusion and the pain and suffering of victims. Without support and education, some of these men and women could become "secondary victims." They are at greater risk for disaster-related illness, stress disorders and psychological problems.

Effects of disaster on psychological health

Researchers have studied the effects of stress from natural disasters since the 1940s. Most disaster workers only have mild, normal stress reactions. Yet, as many as 1 out of every 3 have emotional problems.

In the case of Hurricane Katrina and the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001, the work to restore the community was overwhelming. It required long stress-filled days away from loved ones and familiar routines. For some, the toll on their lives was high.

The good news is that there is something that workers can do to better prepare for, and cope with the aftermath of, a disaster. Here are some suggestions.

Before a disaster

- **Make decisions about daily routines.** Making lunches, taking kids to school or practice, and grocery shopping may seem like small stuff but when no one is there to do them they can cause great distress.
- **Prioritize the essentials** and plan to cut out unnecessary activities until things stabilize.
- **Ask your employer about available resources** to you and your family, and how to make contact if needed.
- **Make sure all your affairs are in order**, including your will, your bank accounts, investments, etc. Be sure your spouse or significant other knows how to access joint accounts if a need arises for additional funds for emergency, travel or other expenses.
- **Arrange for a family member, friend or caregiver to help out** in the case of prolonged work duty.
- **Talk about your feelings with your spouse or significant other.** Assure your loved ones that you will take every precaution available.

After a disaster

- **Attend any professional debriefings offered** and learn what resources are available to you or your family.
- **Talk about feelings as they arise**, and be a good listener to your family and co-workers.
- **Eat well and try to get caught up on your sleep** (this may take several days).



- **Understand that it's normal and healthy to want to talk about the disaster.** It's also equally normal not to want to talk about it. Be judicious. Keep in mind that others may find it frightening or may simply be satisfied that you are safe.
- **Get “out of yourself.”** Avoid excessive introspection by focusing on the lives and activities of your loved ones. Ask them how they coped. Praise them for doing well in your absence.
- **Find time to recharge doing something you enjoy.** Go to a ballgame or to a movie. Get your mind off the disaster.
- **Be patient with yourself and others.** Remember your family and co-workers are stressed, too.
- **Limit your exposure to news media reports about the disaster.** While it is natural to want to know more, repetitive or sensationalized images and accounts can be harmful.
- **Slow down.** Get back to a normal pace in your daily life.
- **Take it one day at a time.** Each day provides a new opportunity to focus on what is really important in life. Many people turn to personal or spiritual resources during such times.

Personal support is essential

Although it is difficult to quantify, having someone (such as a family member) to talk with or simply “be with” after a disaster is a tremendous benefit. On the other hand, being alone or isolated from loved ones puts you at great risk for stress-related disorders, anxiety and depression. If you need help preparing for a disaster or coping in the aftermath, call the toll-free number on this site.

By Drew Edwards, MS, EdD
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After a Disaster: Repairing Your Home

If your house has been damaged by a natural disaster—flood, fire, snow/ice, tornado or earthquake—chances are you're on the hunt for a reputable contractor to help with repair and restoration. Inevitably, the demand for qualified contractors after a disaster usually exceeds the supply. Enter the home repair rip-off artist, who may overcharge, perform shoddy work or skip town without finishing your job.

Because many legitimate licensed home-repair companies can be booked solid for months, frustrated and anxious homeowners and landlords, eager to get their property back in shape, may neglect to take the usual precautions when hiring contractors. As a result, some consumers find that they've hired part-time contractors, who may not get the job done in a reasonable time; contractors from surrounding areas, who may be difficult to track down for follow-up; inexperienced contractors, who may not do the job well; and all too often, just plain crooks, who are seizing the opportunity to make a fast buck.

Many communities have emergency ordinances in place to keep crooked contractors out. But for consumers desperate to get the work done, recognizing a home repair rip-off can be a challenge.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offer the following tips for consumers who may be facing major repairs after a disaster hits home.

- **Deal only with licensed and insured contractors.** Verify the track record of any roofer, builder or contractor you're thinking of hiring. Ask for a list of recent customers and call them.
- **Get recommendations from friends, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, insurance agents or claims adjusters.** Also check with the local Better Business Bureau and Home Builders Association to see if complaints have been lodged against any contractor you're considering.
- **Take your time about signing a contract.** Get a written estimate that includes any oral promises the contractor made. But remember to ask if there's a charge for an estimate before allowing anyone into your home. Ask for explanations for price variations, and don't automatically choose the lowest bidder. Get a copy of the final signed contract before the job begins.
- **Resist dealing with any contractor who asks you to pay for the entire job upfront.** A deposit of one-third of the total price is standard procedure. Pay only by check or credit card—and pay the final amount only after the work is completed to your satisfaction. Don't pay cash.
- **Be skeptical of contractors who encourage you to spend a lot of money on temporary repairs.** Make sure there's enough money for permanent repairs.
- **Ask a knowledgeable friend, relative or attorney to review a home-repair contract before you sign.** If you get a loan to pay for the work, be cautious about using your home as security: If you don't repay the loan as agreed, you could lose your home. Consider asking an attorney to review the loan documents, as well.

If you suspect a repair rip-off, call the consumer division of your state attorney general. If you suspect fraud, waste or abuse involving Federal Emergency Management Agency disaster-assistance programs, report it to FEMA's Inspector General's Office.

Source: Federal Trade Commission, <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/alerts/alt030.shtm>



Relocation and Stress After a Disaster

Unplanned evacuations during a disaster can cause great stress on a community and on the individuals in that community. Some of the stressful factors related to sudden evacuations are the following:

- disruptions of daily life routines
- separation from family, friends, and coworkers
- worries about the condition of homes and community
- concerns about pets
- loss of family pictures and special items
- difficulties getting around in a new location

The stress of evacuation can lead to feelings of isolation in the new location and of being neglected by society and government. Evacuees also may feel there was not adequate time to prepare for the evacuation.

First steps of recovery

Recovering from a disaster occurs in phases over days, weeks, and months. Soon after being uprooted by a disaster, you can start the recovery process. Right now, there are three general steps you can take to improve the mental and emotional strength of your family. The following steps will help you to begin to retake control over your life:

1. **Rebuild physical strength and health.** Once you and your loved ones are in a safe and secure place, whether a shelter, a new apartment, or a place with relatives or friends, make sure to tend to their immediate medical needs, if any. Be sure everyone has enough to eat and drink to regain their physical strength. Make sure everyone gets some restful sleep in as private a space as possible. Rebuilding physical strength is a good first step to calm shattered emotions.
2. **Restore daily activities.** Restoring daily routines helps build a sense of being home mentally and emotionally, even in the absence of a physical home. Simple routines that your family normally does together, such as family walks, watching television, and bedtime stories, help pull the pieces of daily life back together even in a new place. Restoring daily activities rebuilds the normal sense of morning, afternoon, evening, and night. Even though you are away from home and in a strange place, try to resume the daily routines as much as possible.
3. **Provide comfort.** Family members are better able to deal with the stress of relocation when they are comfortable and informed. Comfort can be increased by
 - providing your family with information about other family, friends, and news of home
 - expressing affection for family members, in the ways your family normally shows affection
 - discussing, when ready, the emotions associated with the disaster and relocation, such as feelings of loss, missing home, and worry about family members, friends, and pets

Rebuilding family life

After the initial emergency has passed and the shock and confusion from disaster relocation have subsided, the physical rebuilding and long-term emotional recovery phase begins. This longer recovery phase has two steps:

1. **Assess all physical and emotional losses the family has experienced.** This inventory can help you identify practical actions to take in rebuilding the physical losses the family has experienced.

2. **Develop an emotional understanding of the disaster experience and your relocation situation to help rebuild family life.** Working through emotions takes time. There is no set timeframe or stages for it.

Resolving emotions is a natural healing process that relies on talking to friends about your feelings, mental sorting of emotions, and receiving practical and emotional help from family, friends, your place of worship, or other organized support groups in the community.

Emotional healing

Your personal support groups can help you process your emotions and understand your experiences. Emotional processing involves experiencing the emotions associated with the disaster and figuring out what the disaster meant to your life. One way that many people work through their emotions is by “telling the story” of what happened.

Many people who have lived through a disaster have an overwhelming urge to tell the story over and over again. By sharing stories, you and those around you can sort out the sequence of events associated with the event, which at first may be a confused jumble. By telling the story, you can get input from others about what they saw and begin to put meaning into the experience.

Generally, over time, as you heal emotionally, the disaster story will pull together into an organized story that will have vivid details, emotions, and reflections about lessons learned during the experience. With emotional healing, thoughts and dreams about the disaster will be less painful. You will have gained some emotional distance from the events of the disaster. How long this process takes depends on what happened during the disaster and your own unique mental and emotional makeup. You will always associate some pain with the event, but it will not be so overwhelming after the passage of time allows for emotional healing.

Signs that professional help is needed

Signs that the person is overwhelmed by his emotions and may need help are:

- the story is too painful to tell
- the person creates a wall of silence around the event for a long time
- the person cannot express or experience his feelings
- dreams and thoughts of the experience continue to evoke very painful emotions that do not go away
- the person's behavior dramatically changes
- the person has thoughts of hurting himself or others

If these signs are present, an appointment with a mental health professional should be arranged. A mental health professional can help with the healing process.

Source: Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/publications/100233-RelocationStress.pdf>

Exhaustion in the Wake of Trauma

Everyone has stress, occasional conflicts and even less frequent major crises. Some, however, have had to face trauma of some kind. It might be a catastrophic loss or horrible accident, violence, abuse, etc. If you have been touched personally by trauma, you are likely to experience a normal progression of stress reactions and can expect to feel exhausted mentally and physically. Although recognizing stress symptoms and putting into practice a few stress-reduction strategies may help lift the exhaustion you feel, you need to accept that what you are feeling is not only normal, but also protective.

What is stress?

There are many theories about stress and its effect on the mind and body. It generally is accepted that the limbic system in the brain is “wired” to respond to a real or imagined threat. This is your body’s protective way of preparing you to face the threat or flee it.

As the “fight or flight” response is initiated, chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol act quickly in the body, effecting changes such as increased heart rate, blood pressure and respiration. Constant exposure to these bodily events can make you feel terrible—tense, irritable, weepy, more likely to feel ill or in pain, anxious, depressed and, ultimately, exhausted.

It is possible that the trauma, although over, leaves you feeling threatened. Dwelling on what you suffered may continue to keep your stress hormone level higher than normal as you attempt to cope with what happened. The exhaustion you feel is likely another attempt by the body to counteract prolonged exposure to stress. Exhaustion slows you down, makes you rest and forces you to attend to whatever you perceive as the threat.

What can you do?

- **Try to counteract in the body the effects of elevated stress hormones.** Exercise, breath work and releasing pent up emotions all help to balance the mind and body when exposed to high levels of stress.
- **Try to give your limbic system a vacation from graphic mental images and imaginary replays of the trauma or disaster.** For a while, avoid movies and literature that remind you of what you went through.
- **Regain your sense of control.** Many of us feel threatened by our lack of control after suffering a trauma. One way to cope with these normal feelings is to do what you can to help someone else who suffers. Volunteer your time, resources and prayers.
- **Examine your thoughts about what happened to you as well as your worries about what will happen next.** Negative and catastrophic thoughts can cause limbic changes just like actual threats can. Recognizing the power of thoughts to influence stress levels is a start. Next, try meditative techniques that teach you to “detach” from thoughts and let them drift by.
- **Nurture any possible positive light in which to see your suffering,** whether it pertains to your growth and strength, the support you received from loved ones, the mere fact that you *did* survive, or something else that lifts you up.

Perhaps the most therapeutic thing you can do is to accept rather than fight the exhaustion. Don’t add more trouble to this difficult time by fretting over the myriad thoughts and feelings spawned by the trauma.

Exhaustion is a signal that you need a reprieve from the too many demands placed on your limbic system. Honor the signal and *slow down!* Find a way to rest, relax and refresh.

By Laurie M. Stewart
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When Disaster Strikes: Easing Anxiety

During a disaster, most people initially feel dazed or numb. Some disasters are so sudden, unpredictable or devastating that denial kicks in immediately: “This can’t really be happening.” Feelings of fear, helplessness, hopelessness and sadness are also common. And sometimes, some people are happy just to be alive, or are grateful that the tragedy wasn’t worse.

Lack of control produces anxiety

If we actually knew when a hurricane, terrorist act or tornado would strike, or where oil would wash ashore we could prepare ourselves and lessen the impact that these disasters have on our lives. Because we don’t know these things ahead of time, when the event happens our world is shaken to its core.

We realize that we are not in control, which produces anxiety. When fear and anxiety dominate our emotions and the emotions of those around us, it is hard to regain balance and perspective. But it is necessary if we are to get on with our lives.

Give yourself time to feel better

People respond differently when faced with a disaster. Some initially turn their anxiety outward and launch into action by helping others and staying busy. They may fall to pieces after the initial crisis has subsided. Others remain in a state of shock and confusion, experiencing the entire gamut of emotions. You may have strong feelings right away, or you may not notice a change until much later, after the crisis is over. Prolonged worry can change how you interact with your friends and family. It may take time for you to feel better and for your life to return to normal. Give yourself time to adjust.

Things you can do

There is no simple or straightforward way to fix things or to make things better right away. Disasters are like that. But there are things you can do to help yourself, your family and your community.

- **Recognize that some things—perhaps many things—are beyond your control.** Acceptance of reality is a big hurdle in coming to grips with a disaster.
- **Get back to a normal routine** as soon as possible and as much as possible. This is especially important for children.
- **Take care of your health.** Stress can wreak havoc on emotions and on physical well-being by suppressing the immune system, raising blood pressure and facilitating a host of other physiologic processes.
- **Eat well and get as much rest as you can** during and after the disaster.
- **Take time to talk with loved ones, friends, co-workers or clergy.** Talk about your feelings with them.
- **Don’t obsess on what has already happened.** Stay informed, but turn off the media and remove yourself emotionally from the painful reality of the disaster. Just because we live in a world with 24-hour news access doesn’t mean that we have to remain glued to the television, radio or Internet.
- **Get involved.** Instead of worrying or shaking your fist at whatever happened, you can choose to be a part of the solution. Recognizing that you have choices is empowering in the aftermath of disaster.

Get help if emotions are overwhelming

Many people experience bad memories or dreams or have trouble sleeping, eating or focusing on important things in the aftermath of disaster. Mood swings, crying or getting angry can be signs of anxiety, depression or a stress disorder. You may need professional help if you feel that your emotions are overwhelming you.

By Drew W. Edwards, EdD



Resilience in the Face of Disaster: Lessons From September 11 and Katrina

Large-scale disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina and the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, have shed light on the many psychological problems victims face when their world literally comes crashing down.

Since the 1940s, mental health professionals have studied the effects of stress caused by natural disasters. Some people who have been exposed to various disasters develop major depression and/or anxiety disorders, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual defines a traumatic event as a life-threatening situation that evokes feelings of intense fear, horror or helplessness.

In short, witnessing trauma, death and suffering at that magnitude takes a tremendous toll on one's emotions and mental health. Reasons for post-disaster psychological problems include:

- being injured or near death
- witnessing the suffering or death of others
- experiencing the loss of one or more friends, co-workers or loved ones

First responders—secondary victims

Not surprisingly, post-Sept. 11 research found that more than half of the workers and volunteers were at great risk for developing mental health problems, including depression and anxiety disorders. The risk for PTSD was four times greater for Sept. 11 rescue workers than would be found in the general population. Because of the unpredictability of large-scale disasters, workers are almost always under-prepared for the emotional and psychological consequences.

Resilience

For victims or responders there are no clear guidelines for how to cope or balance their lives. However, knowing the factors that affect psychological well-being (resilience) versus distress can help victims prepare for, and cope with, disaster.

Characteristics of personal resilience

- healthy detachment—distancing yourself emotionally from distress-provoking circumstances
- high initiative—taking charge and ownership of your circumstances and problems
- perspective—the ability to see the short- and long-term implications of challenges and difficulties
- perseverance—the ability to push ahead even when you don't feel like it
- accepting that it may take a long time and great effort to recover and feel better
- resourcefulness—using imagination and creativity in overcoming difficult circumstances
- insight—accurately identifying problems and challenges
- moving quickly into the solution
- willingness to try new things

Personal support

The link between levels of personal support, stress and depression following a disaster is undeniable. The loss of social support and sense of normality that come with familiar surroundings—a home, neighborhood, school and job—is a risk factor for serious psychological problems.

Victims of disaster vary in their psychological response based upon their personal resilience and the availability of personal support systems. The research is clear. Individuals with good family and social

support are less likely to suffer stress disorders and depression after a traumatic event than individuals with low family or social support.

Having someone to talk with or simply “be with” after a traumatic event is a tremendous help. On the other hand, being alone or away from loved ones raises the risk of stress-related disorders and depression in normal life circumstances.

In the face of disaster, victims and first responders need adequate support systems. This can include professional support, such as employee assistance programs. These resources offer immediate comfort, as well as assessment and counseling for those in need.

By Drew Edwards, MS, EdD
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Maintaining Focus at Work During a Disaster

When disaster strikes, the community, including the workplace, is affected in a number of ways. Depending on the proximity to and the severity of the impact, people's lives and routines are disrupted, causing stress and emotions to run high.

Responses to disaster

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency:

- Everyone who sees or experiences a disaster is affected by it in some way.
- It is normal to feel anxious about your own safety and the safety of your family and close friends.
- Profound sadness, grief and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Acknowledging your feelings helps you recover.
- Focusing on your strengths and abilities helps you heal.
- Accepting help from community programs and resources is healthy.
- Everyone has different needs and different ways of coping.
- It is common to want to strike back at people who have caused great pain.
- Children and older adults are of special concern in the aftermath of disasters.
- Even individuals who experience a disaster "second hand" through exposure to extensive media coverage can be affected.

When disasters occur, our first response is concern—not just about our own safety and well-being, but also for the welfare of our family, friends and co-workers. We naturally feel threatened and respond accordingly.

Our stress behavior may be counter-productive. For example, if we allow our anger at a response to the situation to boil over at work, we do more harm than good.

As anxiety and fear begin to wane in the aftermath of disaster, other less obvious responses can affect our working relationships and productivity.

Preoccupation

Becoming mentally preoccupied in the wake of a disaster is a common but counterproductive response. This response saps focus, time and energy from all areas of our lives, including our jobs.

Fear and/or anger are often the root of mental preoccupation in such instances. It's easy to become caught up in things we can't control and get mentally "stuck" in an unhealthy thinking process that leads to unhealthy emotions and ultimately affects our well-being, important relationships and productivity.

Anger: Anger may be warranted in the wake of a disaster but the feeling can cripple our ability to be emotionally present for those whom we love and who need us. Anger can also hinder productivity in our jobs, creating further stress and uncertainty. Venting and ranting about the cause of a disaster, or who is responsible for the effect on our lives and livelihood may have its place but not when our focus should be on other important things, like our jobs and our families.

Fear: Feelings of anxiety and fear are also common whenever our safety or the safety of those we love is threatened. The loss of property or the threat of losing a job can also produce tremendous anxiety. One of the responses to fear is to become irritable, angry and overly controlling. This provides a false sense of security for the anxious person but also can make friends, family and co-workers anxious, annoyed or irritated.

Coping with your emotions



Everyone experiences strong emotions during times of stress. The challenge is to manage and express our emotions in constructive ways. Here are some suggestions.

- **Re-establish daily routines as soon as possible.** Re-establishing familiar habits can be very comforting and helps make life more manageable again.
- **Identify your thoughts and feelings.** Understand that your emotions are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.
- **Talk to others for support.** Talk to your family, friends or co-workers, especially if they share the same experience. It doesn't have to be an expert, just someone who will listen and not judge.
- **Take time to grieve.** Disasters always bring loss, big or small. Let yourself feel the sorrow for the situation, for yourself and for others.
- **Get enough sleep and rest, eat healthy and enjoy your leisure time.** Spend more time with your family and other loved ones.
- **Don't get preoccupied and worry about the things you cannot control.** Life happens and life goes on.
- **Limit exposure to media coverage** if hearing about the disaster overwhelms you. Too much information can increase your anxiety.
- **Associate with positive people and avoid negative people as much as possible.** Although disasters can bring out the worst in people it can also bring out the best. Be aware that negativity can drag you down and reduce your productivity.
- **Be part of the solution by getting involved.** Doing something can help alleviate stress and worry. Join community efforts to respond to the disaster.
- **If you are feeling anxious or overwhelmed, try stress-reducing exercises.** These can include relaxation and breathing exercises, meditation or prayer, working out, listening to music, or taking a walk—whatever works best for you.
- **Get professional help if you feel overwhelmed by worry, sadness or stress.** Call the toll-free number on this site for assistance and referrals.

Sources: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress; Uniformed Services University School of Medicine; Federal Emergency Management Agency, www.fema.gov/rebuild/recover/cope.shtm

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What Your EAP Can Do for You

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) are one of the most effective ways to identify and address personal problems. Companies utilize EAPs because it makes good business sense—healthier, happier employees are more productive and reliable. In this way, EAPs enhance and enrich the organization by promoting the health and well-being of all employees and their families.

How do EAPs work?

EAPs are confidential, multifaceted counseling, education and referral programs designed to help with personal problems, particularly those that affect job performance, including:

- stress
- parenting problems
- adolescent behavioral problems
- adolescent substance abuse
- marital difficulties
- financial trouble
- substance abuse
- coping with an accident or trauma
- depression and the blues
- anxiety
- grief and loss
- legal problems
- caregiving issues
- life phase adjustment:
 - early adult
 - midlife including caring for aging parents
 - retirement

Most EAPs offer a range of services including:

Education. EAPs commonly provide education and prevention programs on stress, substance abuse and illnesses such as depression and anxiety.

Individual assessment. Whether it's stress at home or on the job or concerns about a family member, EAP counselors are available to provide confidential screening, assessment and support at no cost to you or your family. By addressing problems early, the EAP can help prevent small problems from becoming overwhelming, costly and destructive. In addition to listening and talking about a problem, EAPs will often use a short paper and pencil test to help identify and clarify symptoms of particular problems such as depression or anxiety. This enables the EAP to accurately assess the problem and provide the help that is indicated.

Short-term counseling. Many stress-related problems or concerns about a loved one do not require long-term counseling. We have all been overwhelmed and overloaded and in need of someone *objective* to talk with. The EAP is designed to provide short-term counseling, to simply listen, assist in problem solving, or identify new ways to cope with common, but sometimes painful problems. In general EAPs have expertise in stress reduction counseling, crisis and conflict resolution and substance abuse.

Referral. It is difficult to know where to turn when personal problems arise. The EAP keeps abreast of the best providers in your area. For example, if a child is exhibiting behavioral or learning problems, a specialist in child psychology would be needed. The EAP can facilitate this referral and guide the family through the treatment process—saving time and headaches.



Support. With some problems there are no quick fixes. Individuals recovering from alcoholism, depression or the loss of a loved one may require ongoing supportive counseling with the EAP or designated professional. The EAPs work with the employee to develop and coordinate a support plan.

Remember that there are no problems too big or small for the EAP.

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After a Disaster: How to Help Child Victims

Children are able to cope better with a traumatic event if parents, friends, family, teachers and other adults support and help them with their experiences. Help should start as soon as possible after the event.

It's important to remember that some children may never show distress because they don't feel upset, while others may not give evidence of being upset for several weeks or even months. Other children may not show a change in behavior, but may still need your help.

Children may exhibit these behaviors after a disaster

- Be upset over the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, teddy bear or other things that adults might consider insignificant, but which are important to the child.
- Change from being quiet, obedient and caring to loud, noisy and aggressive or may change from being outgoing to shy and afraid.
- Develop nighttime fears. They may be afraid to sleep alone at night, with the light off, sleep in their own room, or have nightmares or bad dreams.
- Be afraid the event will recur.
- Become easily upset, crying and whining.
- Lose trust in adults. After all, their adults were not able to control the disaster.
- Revert to younger behavior such as bed wetting and thumb sucking.
- Not want parents out of their sight and refuse to go to school or child care.
- Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of something they had said or done.
- Become afraid of wind, rain or sudden loud noises.
- Have symptoms of illness, such as headaches, vomiting or fever.
- Worry about where they and their family will live.

Things parents or other caring adults can do

- Talk with children about how they are feeling and listen without judgment. Let them know they can have own feelings, which might be different than others. It's OK.
- Let the children take their time to figure things out and to have their feelings. Don't rush them or pretend that they don't think or feel as they do.
- Help them learn to use words that express their feelings, such as happy, sad, angry and scared. Just be sure the words fit their feelings, not yours.
- Assure fearful children that you will be there to take care of them. Reassure them many times.
- Stay together as a family as much as possible.
- Go back as soon as possible to former routines or develop new ones. Maintain a regular schedule for the children.
- Reassure the children that the disaster was not their fault in any way.
- Let them have some control, such as choosing what outfit to wear or what meal to have for dinner.
- Help your children know that others love them and care about them by visiting, talking on the phone or writing to family members, friends and neighbors.
- Encourage the children to give or send pictures they have drawn or things they have written.
- Re-establish contact with extended family members.
- Help your children learn to trust adults again by keeping promises. Include children in planning routines and outings.
- Help your children regain faith in the future by helping them develop plans for activities that will take place later—next week, next month.
- Children cope better when they are healthy, so be sure your children get needed health care as soon as possible.

- Make sure the children are getting balanced meals and eating enough food and getting enough rest.
- Remember to take care of yourself so you can take care of your children.
- Spend extra time with your children at bedtime. Read stories, rub their backs, listen to music, talk quietly about the day.
- If you will be away for a time, tell them where you are going and make sure you return or call at the time you say you will.
- Allow special privileges such as leaving the light on when they sleep for a period of time after the disaster.
- Limit their exposure to additional trauma, including news reports.
- Children should not be expected to be brave or tough, or to "not cry."
- Don't be afraid to "spoil" children in this period after a disaster.
- Don't give children more information than they can handle about the disaster.
- Don't minimize the event.
- Find ways to emphasize to the children that you love them.
- Allow the children to grieve losses.
- Develop positive anniversary activities to commemorate the event. These events may bring tears, but they are also a time to celebrate survival and the ability to get back to a normal life.

Activities for children

- Encourage children to draw or paint pictures of how they feel about their experiences. Hang these at the child's level to be seen easily.
- Write a story of the frightening event. You might start with: Once upon a time there was a terrible _____ and it scared us all _____. This is what happened: _____. Be sure to end with "And we are now safe."
- Playing with Pla-Doh or clay is good for children to release tension and make symbolic creations.
- Music is fun and valuable for children. Creating music with instruments or rhythm toys helps relieve stress and tension.
- Provide the children with clothes, shoes, hats, etc. so they can play "dress up" and can pretend to be adults in charge of recovering from the disaster and "being in charge."
- Make puppets with the children and put on a puppet show for family and friends, or help children put on a skit about what they experienced.

Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency, www.fema.gov/kids/tch_aft.htm. This information is provided by Beryl Cheal, an educator with Disaster Training International.

Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters

Early intervention to help children and adolescents who have suffered trauma from violence or a disaster is critical. Parents, teachers and mental health professionals can do a great deal to help these youngsters recover. Help should begin at the scene of the traumatic event.

According to the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder of the Department of Veterans Affairs, workers in charge of a disaster scene should:

- Find ways to protect children from further harm and from further exposure to traumatic stimuli. If possible, create a safe haven for them. Protect children from onlookers and the media covering the story.
- When possible, direct children who are able to walk away from the site of violence or destruction, away from severely injured survivors, and away from continuing danger. Kind but firm direction is needed.
- Identify children in acute distress and stay with them until initial stabilization occurs. Acute distress includes panic (marked by trembling, agitation, rambling speech, becoming mute, or erratic behavior) and intense grief (signs include loud crying, rage, or immobility).
- Use a supportive and compassionate verbal or non-verbal exchange (such as a hug, if appropriate) with the child to help him or her feel safe. However brief the exchange, or however temporary, such reassurances are important to children.

After violence or a disaster occurs, the family is the first-line resource for helping. Among the things that parents and other caring adults can do are:

- Explain the episode of violence or disaster as well as you are able.
- Encourage the children to express their feelings and listen without passing judgment. Help younger children learn to use words that express their feelings. However, do not force discussion of the traumatic event.
- Let children and adolescents know that it is normal to feel upset after something bad happens.
- Allow time for the youngsters to experience and talk about their feelings. At home, however, a gradual return to routine can be reassuring to the child.
- If your children are fearful, reassure them that you love them and will take care of them. Stay together as a family as much as possible.
- If behavior at bedtime is a problem, give the child extra time and reassurance. Let him or her sleep with a light on or in your room for a limited time if necessary.
- Reassure children and adolescents that the traumatic event was not their fault.
- Do not criticize regressive behavior or shame the child with words like "babyish."
- Allow children to cry or be sad. Don't expect them to be brave or tough.
- Encourage children and adolescents to feel in control. Let them make some decisions about meals, what to wear, etc.

- Take care of yourself so you can take care of the children.

When violence or disaster affects a whole school or community, teachers and school administrators can play a major role in the healing process. Some of the things educators can do are:

- If possible, give yourself a bit of time to come to terms with the event before you attempt to reassure the children. This may not be possible in the case of a violent episode that occurs at school, but sometimes in a natural disaster there will be several days before schools reopen and teachers can take the time to prepare themselves emotionally.
- Don't try to rush back to ordinary school routines too soon. Give the children or adolescents time to talk over the traumatic event and express their feelings about it.
- Respect the preferences of children who do not want to participate in class discussions about the traumatic event. Do not force discussion or repeatedly bring up the catastrophic event; doing so may re-traumatize children.
- Hold in-school sessions with entire classes, with smaller groups of students, or with individual students. These sessions can be very useful in letting students know that their fears and concerns are normal reactions. Many counties and school districts have teams that will go into schools to hold such sessions after a disaster or episode of violence. Involve mental health professionals in these activities if possible.
- Offer art and play therapy for young children in school.
- Be sensitive to cultural differences among the children. In some cultures, for example, it is not acceptable to express negative emotions. Also, the child who is reluctant to make eye contact with a teacher may not be depressed, but may simply be exhibiting behavior appropriate to his or her culture.
- Encourage children to develop coping and problem-solving skills and age-appropriate methods for managing anxiety.
- Hold meetings for parents to discuss the traumatic event, their children's response to it, and how they and you can help. Involve mental health professionals in these meetings if possible.

Most children and adolescents, if given support such as that described above, will recover almost completely from the fear and anxiety caused by a traumatic experience within a few weeks. However, some children and adolescents will need more help perhaps over a longer period of time in order to heal. Grief over the loss of a loved one, teacher, friend, or pet may take months to resolve, and may be reawakened by reminders such as media reports or the anniversary of the death.

In the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event, and in the weeks following, it is important to identify the youngsters who are in need of more intensive support and therapy because of profound grief or some other extreme emotion. Children and adolescents who may require the help of a mental health professional include those who show avoidance behavior, such as resisting or refusing to go places that remind them of the place where the traumatic event occurred, and emotional numbing, a diminished emotional response or lack of feeling toward the event. Youngsters who have more common reactions including re-experiencing the trauma, or reliving it in the form of nightmares and disturbing recollections during the day, and hyper-arousal, including sleep disturbances and a tendency to be easily startled, may respond well to supportive reassurance from parents and teachers.

Source: National Institute of Mental Health

