

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 disaster is untouched by it.

For many, the disaster continues as a very real presence: ongoing red tape with agencies and insurance companies; endless work repairing property; financial problems; prolonged stress; tension and health concerns. **Feelings of sadness, depression, frustration, anger and anxiety are common.** It is not unusual for these experiences and 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.

Why do I feel the way I do?

The loss 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 disaster and catastrophic events are often pushed aside or ignored.

It is very common for people to experience a wide range of emotional reactions to a disaster or catastrophic event. These reactions are experienced in 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 or catastrophic event.

Things to look for...

YOUR BEHAVIORS

- Problems getting to sleep 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.
- Increased conflicts or tension with family members or other people. Increased anger
- Easily crying or becoming tearful for no apparent reason.
- An increase or decrease in your normal appetite.

YOUR FEELINGS

- Feeling just “not myself”, out of balance, or easily upset.
- Feeling a loss of interest in everyday activities.
- Feeling a sense of despair, hopelessness, or emptiness about the future.
- Experiencing anxiety or fear, especially when things remind you of the disaster.
- Feeling irritable, short-tempered, or angry and resentful.
- Feeling depressed, sad, or down much of the time.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- Trouble concentrating or remembering things.
- Difficulty making decisions.
- Frequently replaying the events and circumstances of the disaster in your mind.
- Recurring dreams or even nightmares about the disaster.
- Questioning of 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 will strain your ability to move forward.

In the aftermath of a disaster or catastrophic event, it is important to **remember that it will take time to heal and recover** from the emotional effects of the disaster. However, with the passing of time, your efforts to cope will begin to reduce the intensity and duration of these emotional 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 and 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, co-workers, or church members. Talk about your experiences with them.
- Pay close attention to your physical health as prolonged stress takes its toll on the body. Maintain a good diet and make sure you are getting enough sleep. It is also helpful to be physically active or to exercise.
- Upsetting times can cause some people to use alcohol or drugs to help 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 need to attend to their relationship as this is often overlooked. Take time to be alone, to talk about how you are feeling, and to have fun together.
- Take time to talk with the 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.

FOR OLDER ADULTS

As an older adult, you probably have many of the same reactions and feelings already mentioned. However, some feelings and reactions can be different or intensified. It's important to ask for support when you need it.

Common Feelings

- Current losses can trigger memories or feelings associated with prior losses.
- 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 limitations on mobility and ability to rebuild.

Common Reactions

- Withdrawal and isolation from family and friends.
- Concealing the full extent of the disaster's impact.
- Apathy – no longer caring to rebuild or start over.
- Confusion or disorientation
- Decline in physical health
- Not making use of available resources.

What lies ahead...

The weeks and months ahead will undoubtedly present some new and unexpected challenges related to the disaster. Although you cannot predict all you will face, it is helpful to anticipate a few likely circumstances. Below are some considerations.

- Moving back home – Moving back into the family home once it is repaired can bring mixed emotions : relief and joy as well as feelings of sadness and fear. These are all normal feelings and reactions. Sadness is often due to the reminders of things that were lost or destroyed. 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 cause reactions, sadness and distress. It is normal for certain events to remind you of “how things used to be”, and of the things that were changed or lost. Recovery and healing involve letting yourself grieve for the loss of these things.
- Your health – As you endure long-term stress, your health can be adversely affected. It is common for headaches, stomach or intestinal problems, colds, viruses, and an increase in allergies to occur more frequently. In addition, pre-existing 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 your family physician or local mental health professional.

Recovering From the Emotional Aftermath of a Disaster



Adapted from information provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS) and The Texas Department of Mental Health.