

Coping with Natural Disasters

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Consumer Series | Family

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During difficult times, especially during and after natural disasters, resilient people seek options, reach out to others for support, and do not give up. However, due to the unpredictable and unexpected nature of natural disasters¹, it is not uncommon to experience 'acute stress response' (defined as experiencing emotional, physical, and often isolated, distanced reactions) during traumatic events². Learning how to manage your stress and increase resilience is important to you and your families' success. As a result, we gathered helpful tips that you can use to cope better during difficult times following a natural disaster (such as fire, flood, tornado, blizzard, etc.).

You can:

- Manage your stress, anger, blame, and depression in healthy ways (such as through exercising, eating right, meditating, praying, etc.) and draw strength from places of peace, your faith or spirituality, relationships outside your family, etc.
- Monitor the *meaning* or *perception* you have about the natural disaster. Strive to find a positive meaning that will benefit you, your spouse, and your family³.
- Make wise management decisions by choosing the best way to decide—some decisions will be made by one person only; others will be made taking into account every member of the family.
- Involve all major stakeholders/family members in the decision-making process to reduce stress and strain and ease the burden of responsibility.
- Practice effective communication by listening to what others say and how they feel.
- Hold regular family meetings to recognize achievements and accomplishments, solve problems, create a shared family vision, and make wise decisions.
- Express affection to your partner. Remember that your partner can be your best ally. Make your relationship a positive strength that you can count on. The two of you along with members of your family can work together to come up with the best solutions to your problems related to the disaster.
- Plan family fun times each week and remember to spend weekly one-on-one time with each family member. Show them that they can count on you and your strength and resilience.
- Maintain as much structure and routine as possible under the circumstances to provide comfort and security, especially with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.
- Reach out to family, friends, and the community to seek the support you need and ask for what you want from the people who are likely to give it—you just might get it!
- Empathize with others and offer emotional support. Listen well and show that you care. Let them know it is okay to feel whatever they feel—it is what we do with our anger, depression, etc. that can harm us or others.
- Be hopeful. All of us have experienced crises and survived. Families are resilient and include survivors who may need to be reminded of their strengths. Even with significant losses, people still have families and friends who can make a difference.



Quick Facts

- It is not uncommon to experience stress following a natural disaster; these feelings may come and go but may continue over an extended period of time.
- Natural disasters are unpredictable and not your fault.
- There is always more than one option to solve or cope with a problem.
- Rely on your partner, family, friends, and community for support.
- Parents play an important role in their children's adaptation to stressful events, such as a natural disaster.
- **If you or someone you know is thinking about killing him/herself, call immediately to 1-800-SUICIDE or 1-800-784-2433 to talk with someone about where to go for help.**

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How do I recognize stress and depression?⁴

Although individuals and families are tough, independent, resilient people, they may experience stress and depression. During and immediately following a natural disaster, **watch for signs of chronic, prolonged stress** experienced by individuals and family members. Common signs include:

Physical signs - Headaches, backaches, eating irregularities, sleep disturbances, frequent sickness, ulcers, or exhaustion.

Emotional signs - Sadness, depression, anger or blame, anxiety, loss of spirit, or loss of humor.

Behavioral signs - Irritability, backbiting, acting out, withdrawal, alcoholism, or violence.

Cognitive signs - Memory loss, lack of concentration, or inability to make decisions.

Problems with self-esteem - "I'm a failure," "I blew it," "Why can't I...?"

In addition to common signs of stress, some individuals may experience and present signs of depression. As you continue to take care of yourself and your family members, please keep these signs of depression in mind.

Signs of depression:

- **Appearance:** Sad face, slow movements, unkempt look, drastic weight change—either up or down.
- **Unhappy feelings:** Feeling sad, hopeless, discouraged, and listless. Negative thoughts: "I'm a failure," "I'm no good," "No one cares."
- **Reduced activity and pleasure in usual activities:** "Doing anything is just too much of an effort."
- **People problems:** "I don't want anyone to see me," "I feel so lonely."
- **Physical problems:** Sleeping problems, decreased sexual interest, headaches.
- **Guilt and low self-esteem:** "It's completely my fault," "I should be punished."
- **Feeling worthless,** inadequate, rejected, and insecure.
- **Lack of future orientation in conversation.**

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How can I maintain my emotional well-being after a natural disaster?

Answering these questions will help you learn resilient ways to cope during difficult times.

1. Fire, Flood, Tornado, Blizzard, etc.—what does it mean to me today?

(For example, it means we're losing our family home. It means that we'll build a new home, that's even better!)

2. What actions/steps am I likely to take with a meaning like this?

(I'm likely to withdraw. I'm likely to talk with and listen to family members.)

3. What emotions am I likely to feel when I think about this meaning?

(Depression, sadness, enthusiasm, hope, and excitement.)

4. When I experienced a different crisis, what steps did I take that helped my family and me survive? What coping skills did I use then that helped me/us bounce back?

(We brainstormed solutions to our problem. We maintained a sense of humor. We consulted with our attorney, our lender, our family counselor, and our accountant. We held family meetings and listened to one another's ideas.)

5. What personal resources did I use?

(My problem-solving skills, sense of humor, determination to take one day at a time, and my spiritual life.)

6. What family resources did I use?

(Communicating openly and discussing pros and cons of solutions that we brainstormed.)

7. What community resources did I use?

(Accountant, attorney, lender, mental health counselor, licensed marriage and family therapist, physician, priest/minister, and guidance counselor.)

8. What personal, family, or community resources could we use to better cope with this fire/flood/tornado/blizzard aftermath today?

(Hold monthly family meetings, accept predicaments over which we have no control, and solve problems within our control one at a time.)

9. What are some healthy ways I can use to reduce stress?

(Ask my spouse for a backrub, make time daily to unwind and focus one-on-one with each family member.)

10. What are some healthy ways I can use to decrease my anger levels?

(Stop, step back, and think – what do I really want for me and for the person with whom I am angry?)

11. What are some healthy ways I can use to manage depression?

(Make a list of my strengths and accomplishments. Visit with a trusted counselor, physician, or psychologist.)

12. What are some resources we could call on?

(Physicians, counselors, ministers, accountants, attorneys, and lenders.)

References

- ¹Benight, C. C., & Harper, M. L. (2002). Coping self-efficacy perceptions as a mediator between acute stress response and long-term distress following natural disasters. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 15(3), 177-186.
- ²Benight, C. C., Swift, E., Sanger, J., Smith, A., & Zeppelin, D. (1999). Coping self-efficacy as a mediator of distress following a natural disaster. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 29, 2443-2464.
- ³Nel, P., & Righarts, M. (2008). Natural disasters and the risk of violent civil conflict. *International Studies Quarterly*, 1(52), 159-185.
- ⁴Adapted from Williams, R. T., & Fetsch, R. J. (2003). Farm and ranch family stress and depression: *A checklist and guide for making referrals*. Retrieved March 4, 2003 from <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/drought/checklist.html>

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