

Disaster Relief

Dealing with Stress after a Disaster



A natural disaster leaves behind a trail of property destruction and a damaged sense of balance for many of its victims. In addition to restoring buildings and replacing material possessions, victims may need to devote time to restoring their own emotional well-being during the recovery period. This can be especially important for children who do not have experience to guide them.

Recognize Symptoms of Family Stress

Families experiencing stress may have symptoms that include any of the following:

- little time to spend together
- a sense of frustration—too much to do
- a desire for the simpler life
- never having time to relax
- not enough opportunities to talk
- explosive arguments
- bickering
- conversations centered on time and tasks rather than people and feelings
- meals eaten in a hurry
- constant rushing from place to place or task to task
- escaping into work or other activities
- isolation in a room
- not enough one-on-one contact
- a sense of guilt

Focusing on the present can help people work through many of life's setbacks, both big and small. Spending time wondering "what could have been" or thinking about "if only" will cause more stress to victims. Remember that the situation is in the past and out of your control.

Tips

- Be very patient.
- Determine what's really important, keeping in mind that your spouse's viewpoint on what should be considered top priority may be different from yours.
- Don't expect things to instantly restore themselves. Accept that restoration (both physical and emotional) takes time.
- Realize that disaster victims have suffered losses and it's natural for them to express disbelief, anger, sadness, anxiety, and depression afterwards.
- Realize that victims' emotions will fluctuate, and moods can change unexpectedly.
- Don't overlook the feelings of children as you deal with the situation. They need to feel they can count on you for the extra attention, love, and support needed to get them through the situation.
- Reassure children, making sure they understand they are not responsible for the problems you face.
- Try to keep your family diet as nourishing as possible under the circumstances.
- Refocus on the big picture, instead of the little details and the little problems, to give yourself a sense of control.

- Talk with friends, family, counselors, or members of the clergy. In crisis situations, a supportive network is essential.
- Be aware of the tendency to resort to bad habits when you are under stress.
- Get enough sleep. Try to get 7 to 8 hours of sleep every night. Avoid sleeping pills, since these pills hurt normal sleep patterns.
- Make a list. List the things that need to be done first, second, third, and so on. By ranking what needs to be done, you first take care of the tasks you can't put off. Trying to get everything done at once means that nothing is being done the right way.
- Learn acceptance. If you cannot control a situation or occurrence, then learn to accept that. Save your energy for things you can control.

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