

After the Storm: *Building a Strong Family*



After the winds calm, the rains stop, and the waters recede, the loss from a natural disaster is obvious. Homes can be damaged, crops destroyed, jobs lost, and people killed. Stress is a normal reaction to any disaster. The stress associated with a disaster can lead to irritability, short tempers, anger, and confusion. Although these reactions are normal, they can cause problems within the family. You may have lost your home, your job, and your pets, but you do not want to lose your family as well.

Research indicates people with strong family bonds are likely to become responsible, productive citizens. To help strengthen your family, instead of destroying it, use these nine skills and attributes as building blocks: communication, contentment, shared history, humor, optimism, resiliency, self-esteem, spirituality, and unity.

Communication

The first brick in building a strong family is communication. Communication is more than words. It is the words you choose, the tone of voice you use, and the timing of your message. In other words, it is what you say **and** what you do not say. Communication also includes facial expressions and body language. Communication provides the platform for a caring, giving, and sharing spirit among family members.

An important part of communication can be nonverbal. A smile says a lot to the people around you. A warm touch or a hug can speak volumes. You do not have a lot to smile about when disaster strikes, but an empathetic look can speak for you. Positive facial expressions can impact and show support for your loved ones.

Actions are another form of nonverbal communication. For example, prepare and

deliver a lunch, wash the car, or leave a loving note on a family member's pillow. Since we all respond better to positive reinforcement than to negative, kind actions mean a lot. For instance, leave a note for a family member that says, "I love you. Have a good day." These positive actions are an important ingredient for a happy family life. A disaster can end positive actions until family life becomes more normal. Though it will require a lot of effort, try to put some positive actions in your family life even during trying times.

The most destructive nonverbal communication can be silence. It can indicate disinterest, hostility, anger, and boredom. Ignoring a family member can be more painful to them than negative words. Since survivors have to deal with shock and grief, a family member may misinterpret their loved one's need for quiet and solitude as a personal snub, rather than the coping mechanism it actually is. Family members should try to share their grief, but they also have to be aware that each person has different coping styles.

Another important aspect of communication is listening. You need to listen with both your ears and your mind. In many cases the listener and the speaker do not interpret the message the same way. In active listening, judgment is suspended and the listener uses empathy to understand the speaker's viewpoint. Following are six key principles of active listening:

Encourage - Try to draw the person out. Ask them about their day and their feelings.

Clarify - Ask questions to confirm that what you heard is actually what the person said. In other words, say, "I heard you say _____. I'm wondering if what you meant was _____."

Repeat - Repeat in your own words what the person has said.

Reflect - In your own words, tell the person what you think he or she is feeling.

Summarize - Go over the major ideas, themes, and feelings of the conversation.

Validate - Show appreciation for the person's effort to communicate.

Family communication can develop slowly. Spending time together creates effective communication. A strong family learns to communicate directly and use both verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

Interrupting, insulting, name-calling, sarcasm, and blaming are some of the many actions that can block communication. These actions can be devastating within the family. When a disaster occurs, the emotions that are triggered by stress can take a toll on family communication. When emotions start to get out of hand, family members need to step back and use anger management techniques to keep from closing family communication lines.

Families that communicate have similar characteristics. They spend a lot of time talking. They share life's joys. They can discuss their sorrows. They openly talk about their hopes and dreams. They are allowed to give voice to their frustrations. Families that effectively communicate are permitted to state their needs and wants. They do not waste their time finding fault, but face conflict honestly and openly. Using proven problem-solving strategies, they resolve problems by respectful win-win negotiations. To gain these characteristics, you have to work on these skills together as a family.

When you do argue, do so constructively. Do not bring up all old quarrels. Maintain a positive approach and simply focus on your one legitimate concern. Be willing to compromise. Other people's points of view have value. Listen to and acknowledge your family's concerns, and then discuss why you see the situation differently.

Use "I" messages. If you start a sentence with "You always," "You never," or "Why do you?" the person becomes defensive. If, however, you say, "I feel afraid when you yell," the other person will be on your side more quickly. These strategies can help avoid an argument or at least lower the degree of hostility in a disagreement.

Contentment

Contentment is very hard to achieve after a disaster, but you have to think of how important contentment is in building a strong family. Achieving some comfort for each member can help build contentment.

You need to make decisions as a family. The most important thing in a decision-making model is to honestly identify the issue, and then make certain the issue is yours to control. You also need to identify and discuss the possible solutions. Then you can compare the

options and look at the pros and cons of each. Once you compare these solutions, a joint family decision needs to be made. Apply the decision and evaluate the results.

Participation in a family decision-making process will encourage the entire family to communicate. Each family member will feel his or her opinions, ideas, values, and feelings have been respected, which will give the entire family the concept of responsibility for individual decisions. The family will understand that jointly choosing a course of action makes each person responsible for the results of that action.

History

Family history is another important brick in building a strong family. Important sections of a family's history can be destroyed by a disaster. The reason family history is important is that it gives everyone a sense of belonging. Family members have security in understanding where they came from and who they are.

If you lost your home in a disaster, it might be a good idea to record some of your family's favorite memories and history. Have some of the older members of the family tape memories from their childhood. Also, write down important events about the family. You can maintain your family history by asking the rest of your family to copy photographs that you might have lost and give them to you as holiday gifts. It is very important that families keep this sense of history to strengthen family bonds.

Humor

Another important brick in the construction of a strong family is humor. After a disaster, it is hard to find many reasons to laugh. But humor builds strong families and helps you deal with stress. Families are under tremendous stresses after a disaster, and humor can help relieve tension. Under certain circumstances, humor can deflect a stressful situation or derail a stressful argument. Humor also helps families cope with problems. It gives the family members a safety valve for anger and strong feelings.

Laughter is both physically and emotionally good for you. It reaffirms life and brings people together. Evacuees from Hurricane Katrina mentioned the importance laughter played in helping them cope with the aftermath of the storm. Just make sure that you are not sarcastic and you do not ridicule your family members - that you are laughing **with** each other and not **at** each other.

Optimism

It is hard to be optimistic after the devastation of a disaster; however, optimism builds a strong foundation for your family. It can provide the energy to get important things done within the family. If you are optimistic, you expect the desired results. For example, even though

you have lost your home, you can expect to find a new place to live within a certain period of time.

Any situation can be perceived in any number of ways. Perception is how you make a situation apply to yourself. If you perceive the situation in a positive manner, it will help build a stronger family. Again, look for something good in a situation. The good can be that your family is safe.

Think of change as a positive thing. Yes, you lost your old home, but you have a chance to build back better than before. Look at a problem as an opportunity to learn and grow. According to Clemson University, the key factors for individuals willing to develop an optimistic attitude are self-expectancy, self-motivation, self-image, self-discipline, self-awareness, self-esteem, self-projection, self-control, self-direction, and self-determination.

It is important to practice optimism after a disaster because an optimistic attitude can reduce the effects of stress. How do you develop an optimistic attitude?

- Reach out - Seek people who care about you and can help you see things positively.
- Laugh - Humor can help you get along.
- Change your scenery - Get away from it all and change your routine. Survivors of Hurricane Katrina found just getting out of the shelters for a sandwich helped their attitudes.
- Love a pet - A pet will provide unconditional love and can be very comforting. If, unfortunately, you lost your pet during the disaster, you might want to consider adopting a new one.
- Live the wellness way - Take good care of your health by exercising, getting plenty of rest, and eating balanced meals.
- Have a good talk with yourself - Practice positive self-talk and notice all the things you do well.
- Relax and let the bad things go so that your body can renew itself.

Resiliency

Resiliency is being able to bounce back from times of stress and crisis. It is very hard to envision how you can bounce back after the devastation of a disaster. But resilient families can and do, and they grow stronger by doing so.

Families can develop resiliency. Loyalty toward family members develops an environment of trust and dependability. Cultivate a protective environment so that the members of your family feel safe and know that their opinions will be valued. Resilient families are committed to working toward shared goals. Resilient families cope with change because change will come. They develop a lifestyle that encourages coping.

Decision-making is one of the most important coping skills. Learn how to make decisions before your

reactions to stress cause hurt feelings and arguments within the family. Approach your big problems in small doses and do not get overwhelmed. Solving problems can get you back to normal.

Self-esteem

Henry James wrote, "The deepest hunger in humans is the desire to be appreciated." The stress associated with a disaster can result in an emotional rollercoaster of anger, frustration, and irritability. As a result of these emotions, you may find yourself snapping at family members.

Although it will be difficult, you need to keep the self-esteem brick firmly in place. To help with the emotional well being of your family, you need to be genuinely interested and concerned about each of them as individuals. You need to understand them and give them sincere praise.

When trying to help a family member develop his or her self-esteem, it is important to determine what that person values. If time is important to him or her, then show your love by spending time with that family member. This can be difficult when you are overwhelmed and trying to build back, but you need to find the time. Small, loving gestures like a personal note or a pat on the back can help family members feel accepted. Be open, warm, and affectionate with your family. Let family members know they are missed when they are absent. Recognize their talents, interests, skills, and abilities.

There are ways you can harm the self-esteem in your family. Setting unrealistic standards and goals can set up a family member for failure and unhappiness. For example, a family may set a timeline for moving into a new house after the disaster. However, federal regulations and insurance adjusters can wreck any plan. A person could feel as if he or she is responsible for failing the family when they can't move into the new house on schedule. Families need to be realistic in their rebuilding plans.

If you ridicule and use sarcasm and insults instead of kind words and phrases, you can hurt your family members. View mistakes and failures as learning tools instead of opportunities for criticism, which can devastate a family member's self-esteem. When you neglect or ignore a family member, you can crush that family member's bricks of self-esteem.

Spirituality

For some families, a relationship with a higher power can provide the family with a sense of purpose. Spirituality can provide needed love, support, and strength. Praying, meditating, or reading inspirational material can give individuals a strong sense of peace, which helps them bounce back from adversity.

Unity

Unity can strengthen your family and help you get through a disaster. Take time to be together, even if it is simply taking a walk around the block together. Stay connected by scheduling time for fun and leisure activities. You can develop a strong family relationship by sharing experiences and fun, such as biking, camping, walking, watching movies, or visiting the library.

How can you maintain family unity when you are displaced by a storm? One way of maintaining family unity is by showing respect. Each family member needs to respect the others and their differences. Another method of maintaining unity is to stay in touch. Use the phone and e-mail to keep in touch if you are in different locations after a disaster. Write letters and send cards to loved ones in different places. Do whatever it takes to keep in touch until you are physically reunited.

The family that spends time together, relaxes together, has fun together, and makes decisions together has a strong family indeed.

Adapted from the following publications: *Building Family Strengths* by Brenda Thames, Ed.D., and Deborah Thomason, Ed.D., Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service; *Triumph Over Tragedy: A Community Response to Managing Trauma in Times of Disaster and Terrorism* (Second Edition), edited by Garret D. Evans and Brenda A. Wiens and prepared by the University of Florida National Rural Behavioral Health Center; *Dealing with Stress After a Disaster, When Crisis Becomes Chronic*, and *A Flood of Emotions* by North Dakota State University Extension Service; *How Families and Neighbors Can Help One Another Cope* by North Carolina State University Extension Service; *Family Communication in Times of Stress* by Ronald Pitzer, University of Minnesota Extension Service; *Establishment and operation of shelters serving socially vulnerable populations: A socio-spatial analysis* by Lynn Pike, Ph.D., Mississippi State University

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