

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Coping With the Stress of a Disaster

Disaster and Stress

Floods, hurricanes, earthquakes and fires are just a few examples of disasters that cause stress and can disrupt our lives. Knowing some basic facts about emotional stress can help us understand its effects:

- Stress is both a physical and emotional response that results from an increase in tension or worry about something that is dangerous, unknown, or disturbing.
- Stress affects people's mind, emotions, and body. It can make it harder to think and concentrate. It can make it hard to control one's temper or more easy to cry than usual. It can upset a person's digestion and make it hard to sleep, even when tired. Sometimes stress will make the heart beat faster, cause stomach problems, or cause you to feel short of breath.
- Some of the response to stress depends on the person's age. The young and the elderly show stress in different ways and may need specific ways to relieve stress for each of those age groups.

Relocation and Stress

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:

Step 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 there are 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.

Step 2: Restore Daily Activities

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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.

Step 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.

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 natural disaster or terrorist attack 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 hurricane, 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 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 hurricane, 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 their 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 their 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 themselves 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.

Where To Get Emergency Assistance

There are local, national, and government organizations that offer help during emergencies and disasters. If your property was not insured, these organizations may be able to help with rebuilding expenses as well:

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Register for disaster assistance by calling: 1-800-621-FEMA (3362)

http://www.fema.gov; https://disasterhelp.gov

The American Red Cross

1-800-HELP-NOW (1-800-435-7669)

http://www.redcross.org

National Hurricane Center

http://www.nhc.noaa.gov

The Salvation Army

http://www.salvationarmyusa.org

The United Way

2-1-1

http://www.211.org

A Disaster Recovery Center may be established in or near the community affected by the disaster. There you can meet with representatives of federal, state, local, and volunteer agencies.

Local churches, service organizations (such as the Kiwanis Club, Lions, or Knights of Columbus), large local employers, and local newspapers and banks may offer help.

Long-Term Recovery

After you have met your immediate needs and are ready to begin recovery, prepare by:

- Replacing important documents that were lost or destroyed such as your driver's license, auto registration, bank books, insurance policies, health insurance cards, credit cards, titles to deeds, stocks and bonds, wills, and other important documents.
- Saving receipts for all your expenses, or at least keeping a record of them. These will help both in filing an insurance claim and in claiming losses when you file your income tax return.
- Making lists of all property that was damaged or destroyed. These will prove useful for filing insurance claims or seeking financial assistance. Document as much of the damage as you can with photographs or video. Include as much of the following information as you can for each item:
    - Name, description, model, year, ID number
    - Where and when you bought it, and the price
    - Documentation such as a sales slip, canceled check, warranty, or correspondence with the manufacturer or retailer
    - Description of the damage and what caused it
    - Photographs that show the item before and after it was damaged

- Recalling as much as you can that's missing
- Letting utility companies know if they should stop billing to your home because you can't live in it.
- Getting in touch with creditors to request any needed extensions in payments.

Once you have met your immediate needs for food and shelter, and have begun the process of rebuilding, the emotional impact of your experience may begin to take its toll. Your Employee Assistance Program is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to help you deal with the feelings you may have after surviving this major, life changing event.

Remember that wherever you are, your confidential **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** is available and accessible 24/7/365.

Contact your EAP at **1.866.468.9461** or visit **workhealthlife.com/us**.