

Stress After a Disaster

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During a crisis such as a flood, people often push through the emotion instead of dealing with the loss and stress of the immediate situation. During the early stages when those affected are recovering their belongings and their livestock or repairing damage, the adrenaline of the crisis allows them to keep busy on tasks toward recovery. That works for a while, but be aware that a tipping point can occur, where stress is too much to handle. Sometimes the smallest event (finding a broken keepsake or losing the truck keys) could set off an emotional outrage or emotional release.



DURATION
INTENSITY
FAMILY RESOURCES
FAMILY PERCEPTION

4. **Recovery phase** - People finally develop a plan to recover; however, the steps in the plan may take two to three years to accomplish financially, emotionally, and physically.

Understanding Stress

Stress is measured by a formula based on duration (how long the stressor occurs) and intensity (how bad it is), added to family resources (time, skills, money, social support) and family perception (for example, recognizing that a plan is needed versus being immobilized by a sense of doom and gloom from the stressor).

Phases of a Crisis

The America Red Cross outlines the four stages that surround a crisis as the following:

1. **Heroic phase** - Everyone works together and takes care of the most pressing or threatening needs.
2. **Honeymoon phase** - Everyone helps each other, finding community solutions, sharing equipment, cooking for each other, and lending a hand.
3. **Disillusionment phase** - Reality sets in and people become angry and even blame each other (for example, when distressed families feel they are not getting enough assistance from others).

Although children may not be willing to talk about what's on their minds, they may show signs of stress, including difficulty sleeping, aggression, and hyperactive behavior.

Guidelines for Helping Children in a Disaster

Recognizing that stress is a real possibility is the first step.

- Deal first with your own feelings. Allow yourself to feel anger, grief, and disbelief, but avoid making major changes in your life. Instead, talk with friends, exercise, and get plenty of sleep.

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- Reassure children that they are safe. Try to be more available to children than usual and work with spouses, significant others, relatives, and friends to figure out ways to help children feel safe and secure.
- Let them know that you are there if they need to talk. They may know more about the situation than you think. Still, they may not fully understand what it all means. If they ask something you aren't prepared for, tell them you will think about it and get back to them in a few minutes.
- Let them know that adults are still strong and in control.
- Return children and your family to a normal routine as soon as possible.
- Recognize that while children need to understand what's going on, hearing too much talk or watching too much TV coverage can be stressful. Children can handle hearing small doses of adult fear but not an overload. While it's important to keep abreast of media alerts, don't leave the TV on so much that it creates more worry in your children.
- Notify the school or care provider if the family is having difficulty and ask for extra attention and compassion for a child who may become moody, withdrawn, or angry. Stay in close contact with the school about the child's well-being during the recovery time.

- Help young children use creative outlets like art, puppetry, stories, and music to express their feelings. Through play, children find ways to open up about their reactions.
- Help older children reduce stress by taking action. They can write letters to others about their feelings, get involved in an organization working to prevent events like the one they are dealing with, or donate money to help others.
- Consider your family safety plan. It's a good time to review basic disaster preparedness before a disaster happens. Where will you gather if you have to evacuate? Do you have a small bag packed to grab if there is time?
- Consider quiet, close family meditation or prayer time, depending on your spiritual belief system. Such practices can bring a feeling of calm when events don't make sense.

