

EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO DISASTERS

Cooperative Extension Service * University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign * Disaster Resource

A natural disaster often causes more than property damage. It also brings a flood of emotions. How people deal with these emotional reactions may affect their recovery afterwards.

Emotional Reactions

People are very quick to take care of what needs to be done: sandbagging, packing, helping neighbors. At the same time people experience disbelief. This allows people to keep working for survival. But there may be a sense of unreality during the disaster.

Other powerful feelings may surface:

- panic/feeling out of control, anger
- generosity toward others
- despair
- anxiety/uncertainty
- disorientation
- cooperation/team work

These feelings are very natural reactions to an unusual situation. The full force of the emotional reactions often hit after the disaster has passed and cleaning up begins. That's when exhaustion, grief, desperation and depression may set in. It is important to pay more attention to emotional reactions once the emergency crews go home.

Coping

One of the first things people can do is pull together. It is important to ask for help. There are many people around who want to help and will help. They just need to know what to do. Help from others may make the critical difference between coping and prolonged suffering. It is also important for people to take care of their own physical and emotional needs by eating a balanced diet to fuel your energy, and as much as possible, getting enough sleep. As people deal with the aftermath of a disaster, they can talk with others about their feelings and look for the positives in the situation.

Helping Others

1. Provide practical help in dealing with the disaster. Help friends or family pack or clean up. Furnish meals. Store belongings or provide a place to stay. Parents may be very busy; offer to spend some time with children to play and to listen to their concerns. Offer specific types of help or ask how you can help.
2. Listen. When others talk about their experiences and feelings, their emotional load seems lighter to bear. One of the best ways you can help is to just listen. You don't have to come up with solutions or answers. It's okay if someone breaks down and cries. Others will ask "Why me?" They are not really looking for an answer but expressing their hurt.
3. Show by words and actions that you care. Go ahead and act. Don't be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. A friendly arm around troubled shoulders or a few words of support and encouragement can help in times of crisis. Small, kind deeds and sincere expressions of affection or admiration also will mean a lot.
4. Keep helping. The disruptions caused by the disaster may continue for some time. Recovering may take even longer. Your friends or family members will need regular, small acts of kindness to maintain their morale and to put their lives back together.

Information was developed by the Kansas State Cooperative Extension Service. Reviewed and revised by Aaron Ebata, Extension Specialist, University of Illinois. January 1995.

For more information contact your local Extension office:



Disaster Resources Web site:
<http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~disaster>

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