

Managing Distress

Life in the aftermath of a natural disaster can feel overwhelming. The unpredictable devastation of a disaster touches us all, leaving us to try to recover from the losses we've endured. The emotions we feel – grief, anger, fear – are natural, but they can also make it harder to rebound after a natural disaster. This handout offers strategies to help manage the distress of a natural disaster.

Support your natural resilience

- **Understand what is being done to help in your community.** Seek out the resources available to you. Learn how authorities are responding. Make sure you are getting your information from a reputable source, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Department of Homeland Security, and the American Red Cross. Be sure to follow all directions from state and local authorities, including law enforcement, to stay as safe as possible. Tending to basic necessities and safety is your first priority.
- **Move through your fear.** The devastation of a natural disaster can leave us terrified of the unknown. It's scary not to know what is going to happen next. Due to being overwhelmed, fear can immobilize you. Pay attention to the small things you can do right now. Keep your focus on those tasks. Fear is a focus on what **could** happen, which can leave you less aware of what is happening and what you are able to do in the here and now.
- **Allow your reaction.** Talking about it with people who care about you can help you process the emotional fallout after a devastating event. Cry if you need to. Some people find it helpful to let feelings flow out on paper or address them in some creative way, such as painting or music. Don't try to ignore or deny the feelings you have. You may feel grief, anger, anxiety, exhaustion, or something else. You may just feel numb. These are all normal reactions.
- **Balance your thoughts.** Remember what you have survived in the past. Know that you have what you need to survive this, even if it doesn't feel like it in the moment. Give your thoughts a break from thinking about what has happened and what might happen next. Try to concentrate on what is positive in your life and the things that make you grateful.
- **Focus on what you do have control over.** The images we see, the stories we hear, and our own thoughts about what happened can increase our stress. It can make you feel overwhelmed and helpless. Try to bring your focus to what you can control, such as what you can do now to rebuild. Or how you might respond in a meaningful way, such as volunteering or making a donation to help others.
- **Be open to support.** This is a time to reach out for what you need. Connecting with others can help you feel stronger as you move forward. Talking to others keeps you from being alone with your thoughts and emotions. Other people offer different perspectives, while giving you a chance to talk about how you feel. This can bring comfort and help you feel more hopeful. It can be especially helpful to talk to others who've shared the same experience.

- **Tap into your compassion.** Offering support to others can help shift your mental and emotional focus. Doing helpful things and offering kindness to others can open your heart and renew your spirit. It can be a powerful antidote to the sense of vulnerability and helplessness that a disaster can bring.
- **Look for ways to create structure and routine.** When a disaster occurs, your life may feel chaotic in many ways. The structure and predictability of doing daily tasks helps us to *feel* normal by *acting* normal. Even a small act of normalcy, perhaps eating dinner together as a family, or keeping to a regular bedtime, or any regular ritual you enjoy – can help you feel more grounded. This may be something you do as an individual, as a family, or both.
- **Feeling physically strong can help you feel emotionally strong.** Make sure you get enough sleep to feel well rested. Eat a healthy diet. Exercise and being physically active can reduce stress. Avoid overuse of alcohol and/or substances.
- **Give yourself a break.** It may be hard to focus and concentrate at times after a disaster. Your energy level may be low. Be patient with yourself. Don't overload your schedule. Don't push to get everything done immediately. Give yourself time to do tasks.
- **Try techniques to help reduce your stress.** Try taking an occasional short time-out to bring your thoughts to the here and now. It can be helpful to move away from all the “what ifs” and “if onlys” for a time. Focus on your breathing and take nice slow, deep breaths. Try to release the stress from your body as you breathe out. This can be done anywhere. These gentle techniques can help calm the physical symptoms of anxiety and slow down racing thoughts.

If you're having a difficult time managing your stress, you may want to reach out for professional support.

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