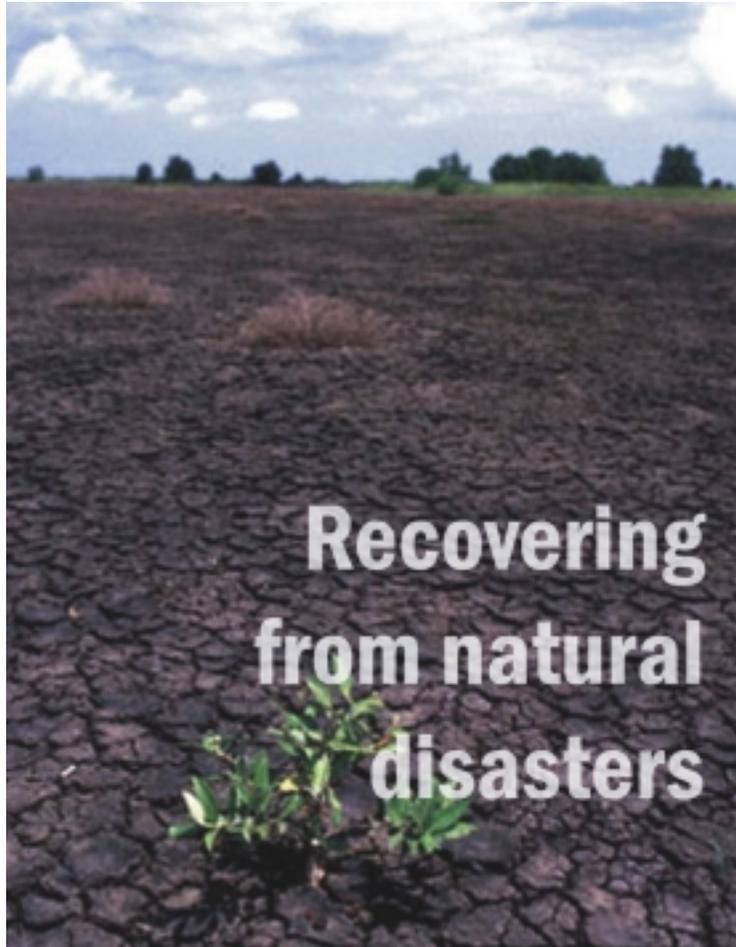


the personal nature
of **AGRICULTURE**



R A N D Y R . W E I G E L
Extension Specialist, University of Wyoming, Cooperative Extension Service

UNIVERSITY
OF WYOMING

B-1103

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

Senior Editor: Tonya Talbert, College of Agriculture, Office of Communications and Technology
Graphic Designer: Tana Stith, College of Agriculture, Office of Communications and Technology

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Glen Whipple, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming 82071.

Persons seeking admission, employment, or access to programs of the University of Wyoming shall be considered without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, age, political belief, veteran status, sexual orientation, and marital or familial status. Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication or program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact their local UW CES Office. To file a complaint, write the UW Employment Practices/Affirmative Action Office, University of Wyoming, P.O. Box 3434, Laramie, Wyoming 82071-3434.



Drought, fires, earthquakes, tornadoes, and floods. The impact of weather can dramatically alter the lives of families.

Natural disasters have been a way of life since earliest history. Even though families have developed strategies to live through disasters, these events still cause agony to individuals, families, and communities.¹

To successfully survive natural disasters, families need to understand the types of natural disasters, their impact on the family, and effective recovery strategies.

Defining natural disasters

Natural disasters run along a continuum, ranging from regularly occurring, predictable events to sudden, catastrophic ones. Predictable natural disasters most often include events such as floods, infestations, and droughts. These events usually display warning signs from months to years in advance, so families have time to prevent, or at least minimize, the damage. And families who may have experienced these predictable disasters before might be more prepared to deal with the situation again.

Catastrophic natural disasters, on the other hand, can occur with little or no warning. They may cause significant personal or property loss, and there is a greater sense

of danger and helplessness than in predictable disasters. Examples of catastrophic disasters are tornadoes, earthquakes, and hurricanes. However, under certain conditions, normally predictable events may turn into unpredictable, catastrophic events. For example, floods are often predictable due to climatic conditions. Yet a flash flood can occur without warning and cause great destruction. The same would hold true for fires—forest fires and wildfires.²

Perceptions of disaster

Why are catastrophic disasters so traumatic? Researchers have identified four perceptions common to survivors of major disasters:

- People perceive disasters as highly dangerous. They fear for their lives and the lives of others.
- Disasters cause a sense of helplessness. People cannot control the disasters nor prevent the destruction that occurs.
- Disasters cause major destruction and disruption. People cannot deny the reality of the impact on their lives.
- Disasters result in a sense of loss. Survivors are overwhelmed by the loss of homes, neighborhoods, loved ones, or lifetime belongings.³



Families in disaster

Families that were not functioning adequately before the disaster most likely will have problems coping after the event. How the family views the disaster, the kinds of family prob-

lems the disaster creates, the support and resources available from the community and agencies, and previous experience in coping with disasters all result in the situation becoming a crisis or a challenge.⁴

Recovering from disaster

Families that cope best with disasters are those that successfully adjust to other normal life crises. They take an optimistic view of the disaster and see the hardships as challenges. They embrace the disaster and let the crisis teach them how strong their families can be.⁵ Strong families are survivors—not victims. Some of the more successful strategies for recovering from disasters include:

- **Preparing and anticipating.** One of the best ways to cope with a disaster is to be prepared. A family that determines how to respond to a disaster ahead of time will cope more successfully when the disaster does occur. If, for example, the home borders a national forest and is vulnerable to a forest fire, what evacuation plan does the family have? Can fire fighting equipment access the property? What steps can be taken before a fire that will reduce property damage?
- **Uniting as a family.** The family (immediate or extended, depending on the circumstances) is the major source of help for disaster victims, who may

need to talk out their traumatic experiences. They need to vent, cry, be angry, and begin to adjust. If the family provides encouragement, emotional support, and even economic relief where needed, the affected disaster victims are more likely to recover successfully.

- **Expecting to recover.** A family that expects to recover successfully is more likely to do so than a family who believes there is little hope. Without a hopeful outlook, morale declines and dysfunctional behavior becomes more prevalent.
- **Returning to normal.** The re-establishment of normal activities is an important step in recovery. Whether it is rebuilding the home, returning to work, or reconnecting with friends, a family fares much better if members make the best of the situation and return to as normal a daily pattern as possible.
- **Finding solutions.** An attitude of developing strategies to cope with the aftermath of the natural disaster is more effective in recovery than adopting a blaming attitude. For example, if the family suffered an economic loss as a result of a disaster, the family might cope by making a realistic assessment of their losses, insurance coverage, and relief programs available. They could prioritize needs and develop an action plan for financial recovery.





- **Taking advantage of help.** A family that uses the available recovery resources will recover faster and more successfully than a family that attempts to “go it alone” without the help of others.⁶

Natural disasters not only leave a trail of property destruction in their wake, but can also leave survivors with a damaged sense of security. In addition to restoring buildings and replacing material possessions, families need to devote time to restoring their own emotional equilibrium during the recovery period.⁷

Whether a natural disaster is predictable or catastrophic, families can take positive action to survive and become stronger because of it. Functional families keep telling themselves they will get through the disaster because tomorrow will be better in so many ways.

References

1. Shirley M. Smith, “Disaster: Family Disruption in the Wake of Natural Disasters,” in *Stress and the Family vol. II: Coping with Catastrophe*, eds. Charles Figley and Hamilton McCubbin (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1983), 121.
2. Charles R. Figley, “Catastrophes: An Overview of Family Reactions,” in *Stress and the Family vol. II: Coping with Catastrophe*, eds. Charles Figley and Hamilton McCubbin (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1983), 6.
3. Smith, 142.
4. Hamilton I. McCubbin and Charles R. Figley, “Bridging Normative and Catastrophic Family Stress,” in *Stress and the Family vol. I: Coping with Normative Transitions*, eds. Hamilton McCubbin and Charles Figley (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1983), 227.
5. Randy R. Weigel, “Helping Men Overcome Personal Crisis,” *Western Stockman Farmer*, October 1998, 18.
6. Smith, 138.
7. North Carolina State Cooperative Extension, *Natural Disaster Program for Families*, 12 July 1994, <www.ces.ncsu.edu/disaster/>.

Acknowledgements

Appreciation is extended to the following reviewers: John P. Hewlett, University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension farm management specialist, and Philip Rosenlund, University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension educator.

