



Handling Stress¹

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HELPING THE FAMILY PREPARE BEFORE A DISASTER

Whatever the crisis — hurricane, fire, tornado or flood — some thought and action before the disaster hits can usually help family members react wisely. Families that work together to prepare for the problem will cope better than those who do not take precautions. Consider how your children might react in a disaster, what your own reactions might be, and how the crisis could affect each person’s emotional and physical well-being. Plan in advance for how to deal with the situation.

For the Entire Family

- Make emergency plans outlined by the Civil Service, Red Cross or other disaster team. Discuss and practice these steps *before* a disaster strikes.
- Discuss these plans with your spouse (if you are married) and other family members.
- Work together to help your children or other dependents to understand the procedures.

These steps will allow each family member to think through actions and reactions to a potential crisis situation, but without the tension of a real emergency.

For Children

- Give children exact steps to follow. Talking, practicing, and actively preparing together will help children understand these strange occurrences.
- Help children practice dialing the telephone operator, fire station, and ambulance. (Keep the phone on the hook!)
- Check news stories of family or community problems and emergencies. Talk over how your family would handle the situation. This gives your children the time to think out and plan actions for real life crises.
- With pre-schoolers play a game of “Let’s Pretend...” Discuss a disaster situation that might arise in your area and then ask, “What would you do?”
- Provide basic supplies for meeting a variety of possible situations. Stock a box with games, books, and hobby materials for sitting out emergencies. Make sure emergency supplies of food, diapers, and drinks are available, as recommended by disaster teams.

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For Older Adults

- If you have older or disabled relatives living at home, review emergency procedures with them.
- If special transportation or assistance is necessary in an emergency, arrange these in advance.
- If a relative lives in a nursing home, discuss evacuation procedures with the staff and make needed plans.

HELPING CHILDREN TO COPE DURING A DISASTER

A crisis such as flood, fire, or hurricane is a frightening experience for everyone, but for a young child it can be extremely threatening. A child does not have the ability to cope with the situation that an adult has. An extra amount of understanding and patience is usually necessary when a disaster occurs. Children of older ages can better understand what's happening.

To prepare for and carry out emergency plans, involve children in sharing whatever action is needed. All children need and want to carry out important roles. This helps them feel a part of the family and prepares them to cope with later situations.

Coping with the Situation

- Follow the suggestions or public warnings by emergency services for the care and safety of your children. Awareness of possible problems and quick action may prevent injuries and other difficulties.
- Tell children simply and matter-of-factly about the problem and how it is to be handled. Give them clear instructions. This helps children understand the situation and reduces their fear of the unknown.

Coping with Emotions

Once families are out of physical danger, they may be surprised that children are still afraid. It is especially important for parents to continue to provide emotional support for their children.

- Remember that children mirror their parents' anxieties. Be calm to reduce your children's fears.

- Reassure children that you are there for them and will look after them.
- Take something familiar such as a favorite toy or book into a new situation. This helps a child feel more secure.
- Listen to what children tell you about their fears and what they think has happened. Encourage them to talk.
- Explain what happened in the disaster, listen, and explain again when children ask questions.
- Spend a little extra time with children before bedtime. If a child comes out during the night, reassure her or him that you are there. Leave a door open and nightlight on.
- In a crisis situation a child may manifest unusually "childish" behavior, such as bed wetting, thumbsucking and clinging to parents. These are signs of anxiety and are usually temporary. Try not to focus on these behaviors and don't punish children who act this way.
- Most children are not capable of understanding the magnitude and severity of the situation. Be understanding and patient.
- If your child's behavior appears unusual, he or she may have lost something, maybe a pet or favorite toy. Ask the child, regardless of age, what he or she misses. Discuss the child's feelings and if possible try to replace the lost belonging.

If You Must Leave Your Child

Children who have been through a disaster are afraid of being separated from family and left alone. Parents should never leave children alone and should avoid any separations, even going to the store or the damaged area. If you *must* leave children with friends or relatives, follow the steps below to reassure them.

- Let your child know how long you will be away.
- Let the child know how often you will be in touch him or her.
- Try not to let the child know you will be away until you know where both you and they will stay.

This will prevent the child from worrying or brooding over your absence.

- Keep in touch with your child frequently and as regularly as you promised. This will reduce the chances of upset while you are away.
- Keep track of your child to be sure he or she is provided for. You know your child's needs better than anyone else.

EMERGENCY LIVING CONDITIONS WITH ANOTHER FAMILY

Many families generously offer their own home and food to neighbors and friends who have lost their homes during a disaster. To avoid misunderstandings or tension, remember these points.

If You Are a Guest

- Don't insist on being involved in everything. Do allow your hosts their privacy and normal routine.
- Respect parents' decisions. Avoid interfering with the discipline of your host's children.
- Maintain your own routines and activities. Try to live your own life regardless of how difficult that is in the present situation.
- Whenever possible, limit your stay to one week or less. A week is long enough to be living with another family.
- Your insurance may pay for temporary living arrangements. If so, use the funds as soon as possible.

If You Are a Host

- Help your guest find a way to contribute to the running of your household.
- Be patient and understanding. A person experiencing disaster is usually filled with fears and may be very upset and tense.
- Help each person retain a feeling of independence.
- Be clear about your own routines and ways of doing things, including household rules.

VENTING FEELINGS IN TIME OF CRISIS

Listening

In time of trouble and crisis many people need someone who will just listen. Talking about the experience helps the burden seem a little lighter and easier to bear.

If you are feeling "blue" or "down," you may wish to contact a friend or neighbor, a family member, your pastor or rabbi, or someone else you feel you can really talk to as a friend.

If you find yourself called upon to listen to a friend or neighbor who just wants to talk, *listen*. Some people will feel very much alone and afraid; others will blame themselves and wonder, "Why me?" They are not really looking for an answer to that question but rather are saying, "How can I endure this?" and "How can I go on?" Solutions, answers, and advice aren't necessary. Just listen and let the troubled person talk.

If your friend or neighbor needs to cry, let him or her. This is a release of feelings of sadness. If your friend or neighbor is angry or frustrated, allow him or her to express these feelings, too. Remember, the anger is not directed at you, but reflects a feeling of *loss* — of control over the situation, of material possessions, of home or business.

Providing Support

Sometimes people who are very upset or frightened later are embarrassed about expressing these feelings. They may feel "weak," or that they have "dumped" on you. Reassure your friend by saying that their feelings are normal and perfectly understandable. Be sure that your friend knows you are available to listen *again*, if he or she needs to talk.

People who experience a serious loss, such as a death or major injury, go through a grieving process. It is important to be available during this period, but also to provide support *after* the crisis is over. At these times, when the crisis has passed and other people have returned to their routines, feelings of sadness and aloneness are often greatest.

One of the most effective ways of coping is to look positively at even the most difficult situations. *After* you have listened to problems, help your friend look at any positive things that have come from the

experience (e.g., family is closer). Help her or him to look toward the future, when things will be better. Spiritual support often helps people survive a disaster. Your friend may find reassurance and hope in prayer, in time alone to reflect, or with their religious community.

If you are concerned that someone is very depressed and you do not feel you are able to help, be sure he or she *does* get help from a trained professional. Suggest a counselor, member of the religious community, social worker, or support group to help your friend through this period.