

Managing Stress After a Natural Disaster

It can be very challenging to manage stress after a natural disaster such as a flood, hurricane, tornado, or earthquake. You may feel stretched to your limit by new realities—you may be displaced, away from familiar routines, sad or worried, or have lost your home or belongings you can't replace. It's normal to have trouble managing stress after major, life-changing upheaval. But research has found that most people *do* recover from natural disasters over time. And the way you manage these unavoidable stresses plays a vital role in your ability to take care of yourself and continue to move forward.

Here are a few tips from experts that others have found helpful as they recover from a natural disaster.

Finding support through family, friends, and others

Talk with people and share your experiences with one another. Talking about your experiences can ease pent-up frustrations and help you see that others share your feelings. You may find it especially helpful to talk with other survivors of the disaster. Remind yourself that everyone's experience is unique, and people's reactions may differ from your own. This is natural and OK.

Tap into your support network. Keep in touch with family and friends. Call or send group texts or email messages if you can't meet face-to-face to let those you're close with know how you are and what kind of help you could use from them. Also, try to create boundaries for those who have not been helpful in the past. This includes limiting how much you share if you are not comfortable doing so. If you may have to live in temporary housing, try to develop an additional support network where you are.

Help others as much as you can. Look for ways to make a contribution, even if you need a lot of help yourself. Research has found that you can buffer many of the negative effects of stress by stepping up your small acts of kindness. Even in a shelter, you may be able to help other survivors by listening to their worries or helping them fill out forms or care for their children. Recognize when you are not emotionally or financially able to help. It is easy to feel frustrated, but understanding your own personal needs is helpful.

Find the information you need to move forward from *verifiable* sources. Knowing the facts—about emergency services, insurance information, support services available for your child or older relative—will help give you a sense of control and lower your stress level. Try to narrow down your goals into small, easily achievable tasks.

Staying strong as you move forward

Put health and safety first. Make it a top priority to protect your health and safety and that of your family. If you've had to leave your home, wait until the authorities say it's safe to return.

before going to check on the damage or your belongings. Gas leaks, fallen electrical wires, and unstable buildings may create new dangers that will add to your stress.

Pay attention to your health and medical needs and to those of loved ones who were affected. If you're having difficulty breathing or are experiencing chest pains or palpitations, seek immediate medical attention.

Take care of yourself. Keep up your normal health routines as best you can. Try to get as much rest and exercise as you did before the disaster. Try to eat at least one balanced meal a day and healthy snacks at other times. Coping takes energy, and you need fuel to make the next right decision. Adapt your routines to your new situation as necessary.

Avoid trying to ease stress with drugs and alcohol. Alcohol and drugs may appear to ease stress temporarily, but they can make it harder to cope in the long term—in part, by interfering with the sleep you need to meet your challenges. These types of substances interfere with your body's ability to relax on its own.

Use controlled breathing techniques to help you calm down when you are feeling stressed. Take a slow, deep breath by inhaling through your nose. Hold your breath for five seconds, and then exhale through your mouth. As you exhale, focus your thoughts on positive words and phrases, like "relax" or "I am handling this well." Repeat this process several times.

Limit your exposure to media images of the disaster. News reports and social media can help you stay up-to-date on emergency alerts during a disaster. But once the danger has passed, too much exposure can add to your stress and keep you from moving forward.

Setting priorities for your "new normal"

Focus on one task at a time. You may feel overwhelmed by all you have to do after a disaster, from letting relatives know you're safe to filling out insurance forms. Make a list of your tasks, break it down into smaller more manageable tasks, and work on one at a time. Check off each one as you complete it. This will give you a sense of accomplishment and help you to feel better by controlling what you can.

Try to do something uplifting every day. Listen to music, read, or play a board game with friends or family. Try to spend at least 15 or 20 minutes a day on a healthy, enjoyable activity. It will take your mind off your stress. Life-affirming activities—even something as simple as listening to a favorite song—can give you a boost.

Keep up any ties to a faith tradition. After natural disasters, many houses of worship provide food, shelter, and other support. Stay involved in your faith community if you have one—it will help ease stress.

Watch for behavior changes in children. Keep in mind that young children may show stress in different ways than adults do. Talk with your child's doctor if you see changes that concern you or that you don't understand or if you have other questions.

Ask for help if you need it. Although most people recover from natural disasters, some find it helpful to get additional support. Get help if your stress seems to go on for longer than that of other disaster survivors or if it's so intense it interferes with your work, your relationships, or your ability to enjoy life. Talk with a mental health professional about how you're coping with the upheaval. You might also join a support group for survivors of the disaster. A community hospital, mental health center, or house of worship may have helpful programs.

Take advantage of community and work-related resources that will help you manage stress. Your community or employer may make counselors available to disaster survivors. Or they may hand out flyers, brochures, or fact sheets with the names and phone numbers of agencies and organizations that can help. These organizations typically help with anything from applying for financial assistance to rebuilding a home. Collect and save the information even if you don't need it right now—it may come in handy in the future. Take advantage of these resources.

If your stress persists, seek support from someone you trust. You might contact your organization's assistance program for guidance and support.

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Michael Owen manages clients facing urgent or crisis situations requiring immediate attention via telephone or chat modalities.