

# Emotional Recovery After a Disaster

HOW FAMILIES AND NEIGHBORS CAN HELP ONE ANOTHER COPE

## PHASES OF DISASTER

Disasters bring with them an incredible range of emotions, from disbelief and anger to a euphoric spirit of teamwork. Temporary homelessness, damaged personal items, lost crops and an uncertain future weigh heavily on survivors. Unfortunately, the need to talk about one's losses, fears and anxieties may be forgotten in the wake of clean-up efforts.

Mental health professionals have identified a number of post-disaster phases that survivors may experience, as well as guidelines for managing disaster-related stress. The most common coping tools are our abilities to listen, talk and actively support one another during this time.

It is important to recognize the emotional phases we may experience after disaster. There is often overlap between phases.

- ◆ *Historic phase.* This period usually occurs at the time of impact and in the period immediately after. Emotions are strong and direct. People find themselves being called upon and responding to demands for heroic action to save their own and others' lives and property. Altruism is prominent, and people expend major energy in helping others survive and recover. The most important resources during this phase are family groups, neighbors and emergency teams of various sorts.
- ◆ *Honeymoon phase.* This period generally extends from one week to six months after the disaster. For survivors, even with the loss of loved ones and possessions, there is a strong sense of having shared with others a dangerous, catastrophic experience and having lived through it. Supported and often encouraged by the influx of official and governmental staff who promise many kinds of help, the victims begin clean-up. There is anticipation that more help soon will be available. Pre-existing community groups and emergency community groups are especially important resources during this period.
- ◆ *Disillusionment phase.* This phase generally lasts from about two months to one or even two or more years. Strong feelings of disappointment, anger, resentment and bitterness may appear if failures occur and the promises of aid are not fulfilled. Outside agencies may need to leave, and some of the local community groups may weaken. Also contributing to this stage may be the gradual loss of the feeling of "shared community" as victims concentrate on rebuilding their own lives and solving their individual problems.
- ◆ *Reconstruction phase.* The survivors come to realize they will need to solve the problems of rebuilding their own homes, businesses, farms and lives largely by themselves and gradually assume responsibility for the tasks. This phase generally lasts for several years after the disaster. The appearance of new buildings replacing old ones, the beginnings of new construction and the development of new programs and plans all serve to reaffirm residents' belief in their community and their own capabilities. If these signs of progress are delayed, however, the emotional problems that appear may be serious and intense. Community groups with a longer-term investment in the community and its people become key players during this phase.

## SUPPORTING YOUR FAMILY

- ◆ **Tell family members when they have done a good job.**
- ◆ **Laugh! Laughter can help relieve tension.**
- ◆ **Be considerate of other family members.**
- ◆ **Express love and concern often.**

### Additional resources:

Your county family living agent; Farmers Assistance Hotline (for Wisconsin farm families), (800) 942-2474; health and human service workers; clergy; school personnel; financial and legal assistance agencies; UW-Extension video "Managing During Tough Times," (VB0052)

### Related publications:

UW-Extension publications—

"Managing Between Jobs — Controlling Stress," (B3459-11);

"Managing Farm Stress," (B2744-1).

## COPING SKILLS

- ◆ *Let people give you a hand.* Take advantage of people who are willing and able to help. Volunteers may be available for sand-bagging or clean-up of debris. Relief agencies may offer food and cleaning supplies. The additional help can make a critical difference between coping and suffering.
- ◆ *Take care of your physical and emotional needs.*
  - a) See that you and your family members eat a balanced diet to fuel your energy.
  - b) Try to get enough sleep. Fatigue slows you down during an emergency and makes you prone to accidents and injury.
  - c) Talk with others about your feelings and listen to theirs. Together, look for positives in the situation.
- ◆ *Be patient with one another.* Realize that when we suffer losses, it is natural to express disbelief, anger, sadness, anxiety and depression afterwards. Emotions will rollercoaster and moods can change suddenly. Spouses' viewpoints may vary considerably.
- ◆ *Don't overlook the feelings of children as you deal with the disaster.* They need to feel they can count on you for extra attention, love and support. Reassure them, making sure they understand they are not responsible for the problems you face (See fact sheet, "Helping Your Child Cope With Disaster").
- ◆ *Refocus on the big picture, instead of little details and the little problems.* Don't expect things to instantly restore themselves.
- ◆ *Remember that a support network is essential.* In addition to family members and friends, you may wish to speak with clergy members and professional counselors. In some cases, you may need to refer a family member or friend for help (See fact sheet, "Identifying Stress in Family or Others").
- ◆ *Show by words and actions that you care.* A friendly arm around troubled shoulders or a few words of support can help tremendously. Offer specific types of help or ask how you can help. Don't be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. And keep helping. Even small, kind deeds will mean a lot to others.