

Stress and Decision Making After a Disaster

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Caregivers coping with the aftermath of a natural disaster are faced with making important decisions about their loved one's needs. This might include rebuilding or repairing a home or even starting over in a new place. Even though the immediate danger has passed, we still worry. Because our lives have been turned upside down, we may continue to feel anxious.

If you are dealing with the responsibilities of rebuilding and trying to 'sort things out' with an insurance company you may be feeling especially

stressed. While you may have family and friends to whom you can turn, there are times when you feel like you must make decisions on your own.

Many of us play the "what if" game with ourselves.

- What if I make the wrong decision?
- What if someone is taking advantage of me?
- What if I don't have enough money?
- What if...

And so we worry. We feel stressed and anxious. We are anxious because we feel like we must make decisions quickly. It seems like things are happening that are out of our control. And often we must make decisions about things we don't know much about, such as choosing roofing materials or understanding insurance clauses. You may be tempted to simply wring your hands and wonder what you can do.

Though you can't do anything what has happened, you can do something to control your worrying. Below are some simple strategies to reduce stress and anxiety. Of course, these strategies won't make all the fear go away, but they may help you regain control over your life--no matter what your age or situation.

Do One Thing At a Time

Do you sometimes have problems finishing things you've started? Is it difficult to concentrate? Do you find yourself constantly drawn into the television to get the latest news? You aren't alone if you find yourself glued to the TV. In fact, doing this has become so common that it has a name: the CNN Effect. If continuous news of storms and rebuilding efforts cause you to worry, watch the news once and then turn it off. Watch something light and entertaining.

Are you so wrapped up in what's happening and the decisions that you must make that you lose track of your usual work and daily tasks? Suddenly you are faced with a mountain of unfinished tasks, and the next thing you know, you are stressed about the things you haven't done.

Specialists suggest that doing one thing at a time, and completing that project before beginning another as a good way to help gain control over stress. Choose one task that needs to be done right away, and then complete it. Then take on the next one. Checking these things off a list is a great stress reducer.

Stick to a Routine

One of the most effective ways to reduce stress is to keep your normal routine. It is sometimes hard to do that when you have other things on your mind. Having a routine is a way to maintain control in your life. Routines are especially important for caregivers. Stress and anxiety can become more manageable when you work to control the things you can. Try these tips.

Maintain your regular sleep schedule and that of the person you are caring for

If you are staying up later than normal to watch the latest news, you may not be getting enough sleep. And, for many people, "watching the war" right before going to bed is like eating spicy food late at night – you just don't sleep very well!

Eat regularly and well

During times of stress some people say that they just can't eat...while others use eating in an effort to reduce their feelings of stress. Focus on the healthy foods you enjoy, but reconsider any plans to make drastic changes in your eating habits when you are under stress. In time, you will again feel normal and can then make such changes. Remember that regular meals are especially important for people taking medications and those with diabetes.

Exercise is a stress-buster

Fresh air and exercise are well-known stress busters. Take a walk alone, or better yet, with friends. Walking will clear your head and improve your health. People who exercise feel more confident and stronger. And, they sleep better too. Ask someone to stay with your care-receiver for a short time so you can get out and take a walk.

Keep your usual schedule

Stick with your regular schedule as much as possible. If you usually buy groceries on Monday, volunteer on Wednesday, clean on Friday and attend religious services on Saturday or Sunday, keep it up. Keeping your usual schedule helps you maintain some control in your life and prevents you from becoming obsessed with the natural disaster and its aftermath. People who miss their regular activities because they are worried can easily become isolated, lonely, and in the end, even more stressed and anxious.

Maintain Contact With Friends and Family

After a disaster, the phone lines are overloaded as people reach out to family and friends to be sure that everyone is okay. Even after a disaster, it is not unusual to feel worried about your own safety, and about your friends and loved ones.

Keep in touch

Sharing joy as well as concerns is a great stress reducer. Sometimes talking to people about your fears and worries really helps. Talking also helps us as we try to make decisions about rebuilding and repairing our homes and lives. Be wary of the “gloomers and doomers” whose negative talk may increase instead of decrease your stress and anxiety. Learn to change the subject, (“Have I told you about my grandchildren”?) or walk away if you find a conversation is increasing your stress level.

Know your neighbors

Many people have close ties and friendships with their neighbors and know each other well enough to be aware of any special needs someone might have. Close neighbors also know who is older, who is alone, and who is a caregiver. Unfortunately, sometimes our neighbors are strangers. There's never been a better time to get to know your neighbors. Learn who you could turn to in time of need, and let others know that you are available to help as well.

Talk to Yourself

Listen first, then talk to yourself

Gather the information about the decisions that you need to make. Get information and bids for any repair work in writing. Talk to family and friends, read the papers, check the Internet, and comparison shop. Then, ask someone you trust, a family member or friend, to help you sort out your options and make your decision. Once you make your decision tell yourself that you made it with the best information you had and then tell yourself to move on to the next decision.

Moving on...the hardest part

Once you've thought this all through and made your decisions, it is time to let go. Ask yourself: “Is there anything more I can do?” If you've done all you can, then relax a little and get on with life.

If you have done everything you can to calm yourself and are still feeling stressed and anxious, you may want to ask a professional for help in finding other ways to reduce your stress. Call your health provider, speak with your clergy person, or contact the mental health department for guidance.

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