

Dealing with Stress after a Disaster

A natural disaster leaves a trail of property destruction, and many times it leaves its victims with a damaged sense of balance. In addition to restoring buildings and replacing material possessions, victims may need to devote time to restoring their own emotional equilibrium during the recovery period. This can be especially important for children who do not have years of life experience to guide them.

Recognizing Symptoms of Family Stress

According to Family Information Services, families experiencing stress may have symptoms that include:

- little time to spend together
- sense of frustration — too much to do
- desire for the simpler life
- never time to relax
- infrequent opportunities for conversation
- explosive arguments
- bickering
- conversations centered on time and tasks rather than people and feelings
- meals eaten in haste
- constant rushing from place to place, task to task
- escaping into work or other activities
- isolation in a room
- insufficient one-on-one contact
- sense of guilt



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Focusing on the present can help people work through many of life's setbacks, both big and small. Spending time wondering "what could have been" or thinking about "if only" will cause more stress because the situation is in the past and out of their control.

Tips

- Be extra patient.
- Determine what's really important, keeping in mind that your spouse's viewpoint on what should be considered top priority may be different from yours.
- Don't expect things to instantly restore themselves. Accept that restoration (both physical and emotional) takes time.
- Realize that disaster victims have suffered losses and it's natural for them to express disbelief, anger, sadness, anxiety and depression afterwards.
- Realize that the emotions of victims will roller-coaster and moods can change unexpectedly.
- Don't overlook the feelings of children as you deal with the situation. They need to feel that they can count on you for the extra attention, love and support needed to get through.
- Reassure them, making sure they understand they are not responsible for the problems you face.
- Try to keep your family diet as nourishing as possible under the circumstances.
- Refocusing on the big picture, instead of the little details and the little problems, will give you a sense of competency.
- Talk with friends, family, counselors or members of the clergy. In crisis situations, a supportive network is essential.
- Be aware of the tendency to resort to bad habits when you are under stress.
- Get enough sleep. Being a "sleep cheat" ultimately will backfire. Try to get 7 to 8 hours of sleep every night. Avoid sleeping pills since these pills negatively alter normal sleep patterns.
- Make a list. List the things that need to be done first, second, third and so on. By ranking what needs to be done, the tasks that cannot be put off are taken care of first. Too often, we try to do everything at once with the result that nothing gets done the right way.
- Learn acceptance. So often, we worry about things that we cannot control. Face that fact. If you cannot control a situation or occurrence, then learn to accept that as a reality. Conserve your energies for the things you can control.

*Based on information developed by Clemson Cooperative Extension following Hurricane Hugo.
Revised for Virginia audiences by Virginia Cooperative Extension.*

June 2000