

November 2005

Environmental  
*Health*

## *Helping Families Deal With the Stress of Relocation After a Disaster*

---

### **What is included in this handout**

This handout gives you information and tips that explain

- basic information about stress,
- signs of and ways to help family members deal with relocation stress,
- signs of stress in young people of different age groups (preschool to high school age),
- ways to help young people deal with stress (preschool to high school age),
- how to help the elderly deal with relocation stress, and
- where to find further information on these topics.

### **Stress Overview**

#### **What is stress?**

Knowing some basic facts about emotional stress can help us understand its effects:

- Stress is both a physical and emotional response that results from an increase in tension or worry about something that is dangerous, unknown, or disturbing.
- Stress affects people's mind, emotions, and body. It can make it harder to think and concentrate. It can make it hard to control one's temper or more easy to cry than usual. It can upset a person's digestion and make it hard to sleep, even when tired. Sometimes stress will make the heart beat faster, cause stomach problems, or cause you to feel short of breath.
- Some of the response to stress depends on the person's age. The young and the elderly show stress in different ways and may need specific ways to relieve stress for each of those age groups.

## Relocation and stress

Unplanned evacuations during a disaster can cause great stress on a community and on the individuals in that community.

Some of the stressful factors related to sudden evacuations are the following:

- disruptions of daily life routines,
- separation from family, friends, and coworkers,
- worries about the condition of homes and community,
- concerns about pets,
- loss of family pictures and special items, and
- difficulties getting around in a new location.

The stress of evacuation can lead to feelings of isolation in the new location and of being neglected by society and government. Evacuees also may feel there was not adequate time to prepare for the evacuation.

### First steps of recovery

Recovering from a disaster occurs in phases over days, weeks, and months. Soon after being uprooted by a disaster, you can start the recovery process. Right now, there are three general steps you can take to improve the mental and emotional strength of your family. The following steps will help you to begin to retake control over your life:

#### Step 1: Rebuild physical strength and health

Once you and your loved ones are in a safe and secure place, whether a shelter, a new apartment, or a place with relatives or friends, make sure to tend to their immediate medical needs, if any. Be sure everyone has enough to eat and drink to regain their physical strength. Make sure everyone gets some restful sleep in as private a space as possible. Rebuilding physical strength is a good first step to calm shattered emotions.

#### Step 2: Restore daily activities

Restoring daily routines helps build a sense of being home mentally and emotionally, even in the absence of a physical home. Simple routines that your family normally does together, such as family walks, watching television,

and bedtime stories, help pull the pieces of daily life back together even in a new place. Restoring daily activities rebuilds the normal sense of morning, afternoon, evening, and night. Even though you are away from home and in a strange place, try to resume the daily routines as much as possible.

#### Step 3: Provide comfort

Family members are better able to deal with the stress of relocation when they are comfortable and informed. Comfort can be increased by

- providing your family with information about other family, friends, and news of home;
- expressing affection for family members, in the ways your family normally shows affection; and
- discussing, when ready, the emotions associated with the disaster and relocation, such as feelings of loss, missing home, and worry about family members, friends, and pets.

### Rebuilding family life

After the initial emergency has passed and the shock and confusion from disaster relocation have subsided, the physical rebuilding and long-term emotional recovery phase begins. This longer recovery phase has two steps:

1. Assess all physical and emotional losses the family has experienced. This inventory can help you identify practical actions to take in rebuilding the physical losses the family has experienced.
2. Develop an emotional understanding of the disaster experience and your relocation situation to help rebuild family life. Working through emotions takes time. There is no set timeframe or stages for it. Resolving emotions is a natural healing process that relies on talking to friends about your feelings, mental sorting of emotions, and receiving practical and emotional help from family, friends, your place of worship, or other organized support groups in the community.

## Emotional healing

Your personal support groups can help you process your emotions and understand your experiences. Emotional processing involves experiencing the emotions associated with the disaster and figuring out what the disaster meant to your life. One way that many people work through their emotions is by “telling the story” of what happened. Many people who have lived through a disaster or terrorist attack have an overwhelming urge to tell the story over and over again. By sharing stories, you and those around you can sort out the sequence of events associated with the hurricane, which at first may be a confused jumble. By telling the story, you can get input from others about what they saw and begin to put meaning into the experience.

Generally, over time, as you heal emotionally, the hurricane story will pull together into an organized story that will have vivid details, emotions, and reflections about lessons learned during the experience. With emotional healing, thoughts and dreams about the disaster will be less painful. You will have gained some emotional distance from the events of the disaster. How long this process takes depends on what happened during the disaster and your own unique mental and emotional makeup. You will always associate some pain with the hurricane, but it will not be so overwhelming after the passage of time allows for emotional healing.

## Signs that professional help is needed

Signs that the person is overwhelmed by their emotions and may need help are:

- the story is too painful to tell,
- the person creates a wall of silence around the event for a long time,
- If the person cannot express or experience their feelings,
- dreams and thoughts of the experience continue to evoke very painful emotions that do not go away
- the person’s behavior dramatically changes, and
- the person has thoughts of hurting themselves or others.

If these signs are present, an appointment with a mental health professional should be arranged. A mental health professional can help with the healing process. One source of help is the crisis helpline listed at the end of this material.

## Signs of Stress in Young People

### How disaster-related stress affects young people

Disaster related stress affects young people in several ways:

- Damage, injuries, and deaths that result from an unexpected or uncontrollable event are difficult for most young people to understand.
- Following a disaster, a young person’s view of the world as safe and predictable is temporarily lost. This is true of adults as well.
- Young people express their feelings and reactions in various ways, especially in different age groups. Many are confused about what has happened and about their feelings. Not every child has immediate reactions; some can have delayed reactions that show up days, weeks, or even months later, and some may never have a reaction. Children’s reactions are strongly affected by the emotional reactions of their parents and the adults around them.
- Young people can easily become afraid that a similar event will happen again and that they or their family will be injured or killed.

### How young people show stress

It is normal for young people to show signs of stress after a disaster. Young people show signs of stress differently at different ages or school levels. This section looks at three age groupings:

- Preschool years
- Elementary and middle school

- High school and teenage years

### **Signs of stress – preschoolers**

Signs that a preschool age child may be experiencing normal, but high levels of stress may include:

- waking confused and frightened from bad dreams;
- being reluctant to going to bed or refusing to sleep alone;
- acting and showing behaviors younger than their actual age, such as whining, thumb sucking, bed wetting, baby talk or fear of darkness;
- clinging to adults more than normal;
- complaining often about illnesses such as stomachaches;
- not having fun doing things they normally enjoyed; and
- being irritable.

### **Signs of stress –elementary or middle school age**

Signs that an elementary or middle school age child is experiencing normal, but high levels of stress may include:

- ongoing concern over their own safety and the safety of others in their school or family;
- irrational fears;
- becoming extremely upset for little or no reason;
- having nightmares and sleep problems;
- experiencing problems in school, such as skipping school or misbehavior (e.g., loss of interest, withdrawal, and excessive need for attention);
- complaining of headaches or stomachaches without cause;
- not having fun doing things they normally enjoyed;

- disruptive behaviors-outbursts of anger and fighting;
- being numb to their emotions, and
- experiencing guilt or shame about what they did or did not do during the disaster.

### **Signs of stress – high school age**

Signs that a teenager may be experiencing normal, but high levels of stress may include:

- feeling self-conscious about their feelings concerning the disaster;
- feeling fearful, helpless, and concerned about being labeled “abnormal” or different from their friends or classmates (this may lead to social withdrawal);
- experiencing shame or guilt about the disaster;
- expressing fantasies about retribution concerning people connected to disaster events;
- not having fun doing things they normally enjoyed; and
- difficulty concentrating;
- impulsive behaviors,
- emotional numbing, and
- seeing the world as an unsafe place.

### **Helping young people understand a disaster**

Disasters can hit young people hard. It is difficult for them to understand and accept that there are events in their lives that cannot be controlled or predicted. When facing an unknown and potentially dangerous situation, young people usually look to adults for answers and help.

Talk with your young person at a level inline with their age. Children handle information differently at different ages. Preschool age children cannot handle as much information as teenagers.

Before you as an adult can help young people cope with a disaster, it is important for you to recognize your own natural feelings of helplessness, fear, and anger, if these exist. Until this occurs, you will not be able to give the young person the full emotional help they need.

Nothing is wrong with letting young people know that you do not have all the answers. Things that can be done immediately include the following:

- let young people know how you see the family situation improving, for example, your plans for their school, your work, and family housing,
- communicate a positive “I’m not helpless” attitude, stressing that “we can get through this together,” and
- ask for parenting or other help if the situation gets beyond your abilities and control.

These actions will start the healing process and help the young person to feel relief in knowing the family will regain control and restore their lives.

### **Parenting tips for helping young people manage stress**

You can use these practical parenting tips to help deal with managing high levels of stress in young people:

#### **For preschool age children**

- Reassure young children that the disaster was not their fault in any way.
- Talk with children about how they are feeling and listen without judgment.
- Let children know they can have their own feelings, which may be different from the feelings of others.
- Let children take their own time to figure things out.
- Do not expect children to be brave or ask them to pretend that they do not think or feel as they do.
- Give the preschooler small bits of information in relation to their questions. Too much information can confuse them.

#### **For preschool and school age children**

- Return to former routines of bedtime and eating, etc., as soon as possible. If this is not possible, develop new routines. The structure of a routine provides security and assurance.
- Do not expect children to be brave or tough or not to cry.
- Do not minimize the event.
- Hug your children. Hugging lets your child know that someone is there for them.
- Allow special privileges, such as leaving the light on when they sleep.
- Spend extra time with your children at bedtime. Read stories, listen to music, and talk quietly.
- Children, just like adults, cope better when healthy. Make sure children are getting balanced meals, proper exercise, and enough rest.
- Find ways to emphasize to your children that you love them,
- Encourage children and adolescents to feel in control by letting them choose which clothes to wear, food to eat at meals, etc.

### **Activities to help school age children manage disaster related stress**

Various activities can help young people manage stress.

#### **For preschool and school age children**

- Encouraging children to draw or paint pictures of how they feel about their experiences. Hang the pictures at a level where children can see them easily. Talking about their drawings can help lessen feelings of stress.
- Playing with playdough or clay is good way for children to release tension.

- Playing music is fun and valuable for children. Creating music with instruments or rhythm toys helps relieve stress and tension.
- Making puppets with the children and putting on a puppet show for family and friends or helping children put on a skit helps them tell about what happened.
- Don't let children watch too much disaster related television. Hearing about the events and seeing the tragic images over and over again will certainly raise their anxiety.
- Be aware of your own emotional reactions around your children. It is all right to share your feelings, but you must also show your children that you are in control of your emotions. Do not look for children for your emotional support.

#### **For teenagers**

- Encourage your teenager to talk one-on-one with a trusted adult or in a small group of peers about the event. Generally, this is most successful when you begin with general events, move to more event specific experiences, and follow with each person's experiences with the disaster.
- Teenagers may wish to talk about values, moral issues, and the meaning of the disaster.

#### **When young people may need additional help**

Situations may develop when young people need additional help dealing with emotional after-effects of the disaster. Young people may benefit from help from a healthcare professional if the emotional stress associated with the disaster does not get better in a few weeks or when they:

- display continual and aggressive emotional outbursts,
- show serious problems at school (e.g., fighting, skipping school, arguments with teachers, or food fights),
- withdraw completely from family and friends,

- cannot cope with routine problems or daily activities,
- engage in vandalism or juvenile law-breaking activities, and
- express suicidal ideas.

Reaching out for help is not a sign of weakness. People have limits and sometimes need help when stretched beyond their limits. Seeking help from others can offer solutions that may not be known to you.

## **Helping the Elderly Deal with the Stress of Relocation**

### **Issues and tips regarding stress effects in the elderly**

Several issues need to be taken into account when helping elderly friends and family who may be under stress after a disaster and who are suffering from the effects of a sudden relocation.

#### **Communication problems**

Some older persons in shelters or in new surroundings may have difficulty

- understanding family and friends, or
- talking to people or answering questions.

Normal age-related slowing of thinking, problems with seeing and hearing, and reduced ability to physically move because of illnesses or the effects of medications may cause this.

Tip: Make sure that the elderly person has the eyeglasses they need and that their hearing aid is on before talking to them. Be patient and calm. Speak loudly enough for them to hear you, but do not shout. Keep your messages simple and clear. Repeat information and make sure that the person in your care hears and understands what is said.

### **Danger from falls**

Be aware that in unfamiliar settings, clutter and poor lighting could cause an elderly person to fall. Balance problems, muscle weakness, and medications can add to their risk of falling.

Tip: Check new living quarters for anything that could lead to a fall, for example, loose throw rugs. Make sure stairs and hallways are well lit and provide walking assistance if needed.

### **Chronic illness and dietary considerations**

Arthritis may prevent an elderly family member from standing in line. Some medications can cause mental confusion or a greater susceptibility to problems such as dehydration. Memory problems can cause communication problems. Neglect of special meal needs in certain illnesses can lead to medical crises.

Tip: As soon as possible, make sure the elderly family member

- has all of their medicines with them,
- eats the foods require to manage their illnesses,
- has written diet and medication information with them in case they are separated from you, and
- establishes contact with their medical care provider or that you help them find a new one and provide their medical history to the care provider.

### **Disoriented Behavior**

At night, when nearby surroundings are not seen as well as in the day, some elderly with mild or moderate dementia or problems thinking clearly can become confused about where they are. You may need to orient them to time and place.

Tip: Make sure the elderly person has a clock and a calendar in their room. If you have any familiar things of theirs, place those in their room. Be sure that there is some soft, nonglaring light in their room and that it is as quiet and calm as possible. If you cannot reorient the elderly person to where they are and your efforts upset

them, just reassure them that things are okay or distract them with other activities.

### **Multiple loss effect**

The elderly family member who may have lost their spouse, income, home, or physical capabilities may have difficulty “bouncing back” from their loss.

Tip: Show empathy for the person’s situation by listening. Give comfort by your presence and let them know you are there and care for them. Do not minimize what they have lost.

### **Worries about loss of independence**

Loss of the ability to live independently because of disaster-related injury or loss of home can be the biggest blow that a disaster deals the elderly.

Tip: Within the constraints of the situation, allow them to do what they can for themselves and keep as much dignity and independence as is possible.

### **“Welfare” stigma and unfamiliarity with bureaucracy**

Many older family members are unwilling to accept government “welfare” assistance because they have always “paid their way.” In a disaster, however, government help may be needed. Their unwillingness to accept help may be made worse by unfamiliarity with government services for which they are eligible, particularly during disasters.

Tip: If the person is reluctant to accept assistance, relate the assistance to a time when they helped someone in need or explain that this help comes from taxes they have paid.

### **Getting too hot or too cold**

Older person may not handle extremes of heat or cold well. Either too much heat or cold can have marked effects upon them. This becomes critical in disasters that close down furnaces or air conditioners.

Tip: Be aware of the need to keep elderly family members out of extremes of heat and cold.

### Dehydration

Elderly persons are more susceptible to dehydration. They do not feel thirsty as quickly as young people do and do not drink water and other liquids as often. Some of the medicine they take can also lead to water loss.

Tip: Check to make sure that your elderly relatives have access to safe, clean drinking water and that they are drinking it. Watch for signs of dehydration, such as sunken eyes, no tears, and dry mouth.

### Language and cultural barriers

Lower reading skills among some elders and inadequate command of the English language among speakers of other languages can cause confusion and frustration at relief centers or in new housing locations.

Tip: Try to match the elderly person with someone fluent in his or her native language.

### Senior citizens dealing with change

Remember that elderly persons have the strengths gained from a lifetime of coping with adversity. Know also that elderly people tend to under-report problems, both to family and physicians, as they may want to cope on their own. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to how they feel and act in times of change and relocation.

### Signs of stress in the elderly

The elderly can suffer various symptoms from worsening of pre-existing medical problems, problems with medications, new illnesses or psychological stress. Therefore, it is important to make sure that they are medically stable before deciding these symptoms are due to emotional stress.

Under stress, whether from physical or emotional sources, the elderly can

- become mentally confused,
- tire easily,

- withdraw from friends and family, and
- in severe cases, undergo personality changes.

You should also know that the elderly might tend to complain of bodily symptoms rather than emotional problems when under stress. Again, remember not to dismiss any bodily symptoms as just due to stress.

### Special issues for the frail elderly

Many elderly are very healthy, well-functioning, capable adults. For example, at age 60 years, only 15% of elderly people suffer from dementia, at age 85 years, 50% of the elderly are affected by dementia. The “older” more frail elderly are the ones who may be more vulnerable in a disaster due to medical illnesses.

### How to help the elderly deal with stress

In general terms, these principles will help guide you when helping an elderly person deal with the stress of evacuation and relocation:

- Provide strong and persistent verbal reassurance.
- Assist with recovery of physical possessions as is safe, make frequent home visits, and arrange for companions.
- Give special attention to suitable residential relocation, ideally in familiar surroundings with friends or acquaintances.
- Help re-establish contact with family and friends.
- Assist in obtaining medical and financial assistance.
- Help re-establish medication and any dietary regimens.
- Provide transportation to the doctor, grocery store, etc.



## If You Need More Information

### Where can you go for help?

#### Crisis Helpline available for victims of Hurricane Katrina

By dialing 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255), callers will be connected to a network of local crisis centers across the country. Callers to the hotline will receive counseling from trained staff at the closest certified crisis center in the network.

The network is run by U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and involves more than 110 certified crisis centers. People who are in emotional distress or suicidal can call at any time from anywhere in the nation. They can talk to a trained worker who will listen to and assist them in getting the mental health help they need. People will receive immediate access to local resources, referrals and expertise.

#### Here are some Web sites on psychological recovery:

- National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Fact sheets for "Self Care and Self-Help Following Disasters" and "Helping Survivors in the Wake of Disaster." Available at URL: <http://www.ncptsd.org/facts/disasters/index.html>.
- Administration on Aging. Resources for elders and family. <http://www.aoa.gov>
- National Mental Health Association. Coping with disaster: tips for adults. Available at URL: <http://www.nmha.org/reassurance/anniversary/index.cfm>.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Mental Health Information for those affected by Hurricane Katrina

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/>

Here are some Web sites on helping the elderly:

- National Institutes on Aging. Part of the National Institutes of Health, this site has age pages with in-depth information on caring for the elderly.

<http://www.niapublications.org/>

- American Association of Retired Persons. Contains good information on family and legal matters.

<http://www.aarp.org/>

Medicare. Official website with all the information on the health benefits associated with Medicare

- <http://www.medicare.gov/>