

Recovering from Disaster

This chapter offers some general advice on steps to take after disaster strikes to begin putting your home, your community, and your life back to normal.

Health and safety

Your first concern after a disaster is your household's health and safety.

1. Be aware of new hazards created by the disaster. Watch for washed out roads, contaminated buildings, contaminated water, gas leaks, broken glass, damaged wires and slippery floors.
2. Be aware of exhaustion. Don't try to do too much at once. Set priorities and pace yourself.
3. Drink plenty of clean water. Eat well and get enough rest.
4. Wear sturdy work boots and gloves. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and clean water often when working in debris.
5. Inform local authorities about health and safety hazards, including chemical releases, downed power lines, washed out roads, smoldering insulation or dead animals.

After an emergency, continue to listen for news on where to get help from disaster relief organizations and government agencies.

Returning to a damaged home

Returning to a damaged home can be both physically and mentally challenging. Above all, use caution.

1. Keep a battery-powered radio with you so you can listen for emergency updates.
2. Wear sturdy work boots and gloves.
3. Before going inside, walk carefully around the outside of your home and check for loose power lines, gas leaks and structural damage. If you smell gas, do not enter the home and leave immediately. Do not enter if floodwaters remain around the building. If you have any doubts about safety, have your home inspected by a professional before entering.
4. If your home was damaged by fire, do not enter until authorities say it is safe.
5. Check for cracks in the roof, foundation and chimneys. If it looks like the building may collapse, leave immediately.
6. A battery-powered flash light is the best source of light for inspecting a damaged home. CAUTION: The flashlight should be turned on outside before entering a damaged home—the battery may produce a spark that could ignite leaking gas, if present.
7. Do not use oil, gas lanterns, candles or torches for lighting inside a damaged home. Leaking gas or other flammable materials may be present. Do not smoke. Do not turn on the lights until you're sure they're safe to use.
8. Enter the home carefully and check for damage. Be aware of loose boards and slippery floors.
9. Watch out for animals, especially poisonous snakes. Use a stick to poke through debris.
10. If you smell gas or hear a hissing or blowing sound, open a window and

leave immediately. Turn off the main gas valve from the outside, if you can. Call the gas company from a neighbor's residence. If you shut off the gas supply at the main valve, you will need a professional to turn it back on.

11. Check the electrical system where visible and accessible. If you see sparks, broken or frayed wires, or if you smell hot insulation, turn off the electricity at the main fuse box or circuit breaker. If, however, you are wet, standing in water or unsure of your safety, do not touch anything electrical. Rather, leave the building and call for help.
12. Check appliances. If appliances are wet, turn off the electricity at the main fuse box or circuit breaker. Then unplug appliances and let them dry out. Have appliances checked by a professional before using them again. Also have the electrical system checked by an electrician before turning the power back on.
13. Check the water and sewage systems. If pipes are damaged, turn off the main water valve.
14. Clean up spilled medicines, bleaches and gasoline. Open cabinets carefully. Be aware of objects that may fall.
15. Try to protect your home from further damage. Open windows and doors to get air moving through.
16. Clean and disinfect everything that got wet. Mud left behind by floodwaters can contain sewage and chemicals.
17. If your basement has flooded, pump it out gradually (about one third of the

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water per day) to avoid damage. The walls may collapse and the floor may buckle if the basement is pumped out while the surrounding ground is still waterlogged.

18. Check with local authorities before using any water; it could be contaminated. Wells should be pumped out and the water tested by authorities before drinking.
19. Throw out fresh food, cosmetics, and medicines that have come into contact with floodwaters.
20. Check refrigerated food for spoilage—your power supply may have been disrupted during the emergency. Throw out all spoiled food and any food that you suspect might be spoiled.
21. Call your insurance agent. Take pictures of damages. Keep good records of repair and cleaning costs.

Getting disaster assistance

Throughout the recovery period, it's important to monitor local radio or television reports and other media sources for information about where to get emergency housing, food, first aid, clothing and financial assistance. Following is general information about the kinds of assistance that may be available.

Direct assistance to individuals and families may come from any number of organizations. The American Red Cross is often stationed right at the scene to help people with their most immediate medical, food and housing needs. Other voluntary organizations, such as the Salvation Army, may also provide food, shelter and supplies, and assist in cleanup efforts.

Church groups and synagogues are often involved as well.

In addition, social service agencies from local or state governments may be available to help people in shelters or provide direct assistance to families.

In the most severe disasters, the federal government is also called in to help individuals and families with temporary housing, counseling (for post-disaster trauma), low-interest loans and grants, and other assistance. Small businesses and farmers are also eligible.

Most federal assistance becomes available when the President of the U.S. declares a “Major Disaster” for the affected area at the request of a state governor. When this happens, FEMA may establish a Disaster Recovery Center (DRC). A DRC is a facility established in, or near to, the community affected by the disaster, where persons can meet face-to-face with represented federal, state, local, and volunteer agencies to:

- Discuss their disaster-related needs.
- Obtain information about disaster assistance programs.
- Teleregister for assistance.
- Update registration information.
- Learn about measures for rebuilding that can eliminate or reduce the risk of future loss.
- Learn how to complete the Small Business Administration (SBA) loan application, which is also the form used to qualify all individuals for low cost loans or grants, including those for repair or replacement of damaged homes and furnishings.
- Request the status of their Disaster Housing Application.

Persons can apply for assistance by telephone without going to a DRC by dialing 1-800-621-FEMA (3362).

Mental Health and Crisis Counseling

The emotional toll that disaster brings can sometimes be even more devastating than the financial strains of damage and loss of home, business or personal property.

Children and the elderly are special concerns in the aftermath of disasters. Even individuals who experience a disaster “second hand” through exposure to extensive media coverage can be affected.

Crisis counseling programs often include community outreach, consultation, and education. FEMA and the state and local governments of the affected area may provide crisis counseling assistance to help people cope with and recover from disaster. If you feel you need assistance—get help.

Coping with disaster

You need to be aware of signs that one needs help in coping with the stress of a disaster.

1. Things to remember when trying to understand disaster events.
 - No one who sees a disaster is untouched by it.
 - It is normal to feel anxious about your own safety and that of your family and close friends.
 - Profound sadness, grief and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
 - Acknowledging your feelings helps you recover.
 - Focusing on your strengths and abilities will help you to heal.
 - Accepting help from community programs and resources is healthy.

- We each have different needs and different ways of coping.
- It is common to want to strike back at people who have caused great pain. However, nothing good is accomplished by hateful language or actions.

2. Signs that adults need crisis counseling/stress management assistance.

- Difficulty communicating thoughts.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Difficulty maintaining balance.
- Easily frustrated.
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol.
- Limited attention span.
- Poor work performance.
- Headaches/stomach problems.
- Tunnel vision/muffled hearing.
- Colds or flu-like symptoms.
- Disorientation or confusion.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Reluctance to leave home.
- Depression, sadness.
- Feelings of hopelessness.
- Mood-swings and crying easily.
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt.
- Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone.

Do not drop off food, clothing or any other item to a government agency or disaster relief organization unless a particular item has been requested.

- Don't hold yourself responsible for the disastrous event or be frustrated because you feel that you cannot help directly in the rescue work.
- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing by staying active in your daily life patterns or by adjusting them. This healthy outlook will help you and your household (e.g., healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation, meditation).
- Maintain a normal household and daily routine, limiting demanding responsibilities of you and your household.
 - Spend time with family and friends.
 - Participate in memorials, rituals, and use of symbols as a way to express feelings.
 - Use existing support groups of family, friends, and church.
 - Establish a family emergency plan. Feeling there is something you can do can be very comforting.

Helping children cope with disaster

Disasters can leave children feeling frightened, confused and insecure. Whether a child has personally experienced trauma, has merely seen the event on television or heard it discussed by adults, it is important for parents and teachers to be informed and ready to help if reactions to stress begin to occur.

Children respond to trauma in many different ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the event; others may seem to be doing fine for weeks or months

3. Ways to ease disaster related stress.

- Talk with someone about your feelings—anger, sorrow, and other emotions—even though it may be difficult.
- Seek help from professional counselors who deal with post-disaster stress.

and then begin to show worrisome behavior. Knowing the signs that are common at different ages can help parents and teachers recognize problems and respond appropriately.

Reassurance is the key to helping children through a traumatic time. Very young children need a lot of cuddling, as well as verbal support. Answer questions about the disaster honestly, but don't dwell on frightening details or allow the subject to dominate family or classroom time indefinitely. Encourage children of all ages to express emotions through conversation, drawing or painting and to find a way to help others who were affected by the disaster. Also, limit the amount of disaster related material (television, etc.) your children are seeing or hearing and pay careful attention to how graphic it is.

Try to maintain a normal household or classroom routine and encourage children to participate in recreational activity. Reduce your expectations temporarily about performance in school or at home, perhaps by substituting less demanding responsibilities for normal chores.

Additional information about how to communicate with children can be found on the FEMA for Kids website at www.fema.gov/kids.

Helping others

The compassion and generosity of the American people is never more evident than after a disaster. People want to help. Here are some general guidelines on helping others after a disaster.

1. In addition to the people you care for on a day-to-day basis, consider the needs of your neighbors and people with special needs.
2. If you want to volunteer, check with local organizations or listen to local news reports for information about where volunteers are needed. Until volunteers are specifically requested, stay away from disaster areas.
3. If you are needed in a disaster area, bring your own food, water and emergency supplies. This is especially important in cases where a large area has been affected and emergency items are in short supply.
4. Do not drop off food, clothing or any other item to a government agency or disaster relief organization unless a particular item has been requested. Normally these organizations do not have the resources to sort through the donated items.
5. You can give a check or money order to a recognized disaster relief organization. These groups are organized to process checks, purchase what is needed and get it to the people who need it most.
6. If your company wants to donate emergency supplies, donate a quantity of a given item or class of items (such as nonperishable food) rather than a mix of different items. Also, determine where your donation is going, how it's going to get there, who's going to unload it and how it's going to be distributed. Without sufficient planning, much needed supplies will be left unused.