

ARE YOU READY?



**Get
Ready**

www.aphagetready.org

Mental health and disasters: Taking care of your emotional health

Preparing for a disaster is a good way to protect yourself from physical harm. However, it's also important to protect your mental well-being. Strong emotional reactions to witnessing a disaster and facing its aftermath are perfectly normal. But like all preparedness activities, knowing what you're in for can boost your resiliency and help you cope in healthy ways.

Common emotions after a disaster

Knowing the common emotions that come with the unexpected can help you deal with them in healthy ways. Reactions to a disaster vary from person to person. However, some common reactions include shock and disbelief; difficulty concentrating; trouble sleeping; changes in eating habits; changes in alcohol and tobacco use; feelings of anger, guilt, grief and helplessness; and dramatic mood swings.

The length of time you may experience such reactions varies and is often linked to the severity of the disaster and the magnitude of a community's recovery.

Here are some tips that can help you and your loved ones heal in healthy and respectful ways:

- Be patient: Mental healing can take time. Allow yourself time to grieve for what you have lost.
- If you feel able, talk about your experiences with friends or family. If you don't feel like talking, consider writing in a journal or diary.
- Get back to a daily routine as soon as you can.
- Avoid overexposure to disaster coverage by the media.
- Take care of your physical health: Try your best to eat healthily, exercise, wash your hands regularly, get plenty of sleep and drink plenty of clean water. Avoid alcohol, tobacco and drugs.



Photo courtesy iStockphoto—Tatiana Gladskikh

- Seek out time to relax and socialize with friends and family. Allow yourself and others time alone if needed.
- If needed, don't be afraid to ask for professional help or seek out support groups. Often among the emergency responders at a disaster site are mental health professionals who can assist you in the emotional recovery process.

Why preparing makes a difference

Being prepared for the unexpected is one of the best ways to lessen the impact of a disaster, both physically and mentally. Plus, knowing you're prepared will help you stay calm and clear-headed in the face of a disaster so you can make safe decisions for you and your loved ones.

Some quick tips for getting ready for a disaster are:

- **Get informed:** Know what kinds of disasters can happen in your community, and familiarize yourself with local warning systems, evacuation routes and shelters. If you or a household member will need help in a disaster, contact local emergency officials about any assistance they can provide and whether any local shelters will be equipped to care for evacuees with special medical needs. Also, most shelters don't allow pets, so plan accordingly – this can be especially important as being separated from a beloved animal companion can be emotionally traumatic.
- **Create an emergency stockpile kit:** While different disasters can require different stockpile items, a few basics are needed for any emergency. These include a battery-operated radio, clean water and nonperishable foods, a first aid kit, a manual can opener, extra batteries, important medications and documents, a flashlight, water-purifying agents, clothing, bedding, copies of important documents and pet food, if needed. Make your kit portable in case of evacuation or make a second stockpile kit that you can easily take with you.



Photo courtesy iStockphoto—Alina Solovyova-Vincent



Photo courtesy iStockphoto—Marina Bartel

- **Practice and communication:** Include all of your household members in creating a household emergency plan and putting together a stockpile kit. Practice household emergency drills. Designate an emergency meeting point and contact person in case an emergency happens when members of your household are separated. Being involved in the preparedness process is critical for building confidence and can lessen stress and mental health effects.



800 I Street, NW · Washington, DC · 20001-3710
202-777-APHA · www.aphagetready.org · getready@apha.org



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.
Buchanan County Public Health