

Recovering from Disaster

Recovering from a disaster is usually a gradual process. Safety is a primary issue, as are mental and physical well-being. If assistance is available, knowing how to access it makes the process faster and less stressful. This section offers some general advice on steps to take after disaster strikes in order to begin getting your home, your community and your life back to normal.



Health & Safety Guidelines

Recovering from disaster is usually a gradual process. Safety is a primary issue, as are mental and physical well-being. If assistance is available, knowing how to access it makes the process faster and less stressful.

Your first concern after a disaster is your family's health and safety. You need to consider possible safety issues and monitor family health and well-being.

Administer first aid and seek medical attention for any injured person following a disaster.

- Check for injuries. Do not attempt to move seriously injured persons unless they are in immediate danger of death or further injury. If you must move an unconscious person, first stabilize the neck and back, then call for help immediately.
- If the victim is not breathing, carefully position the victim for artificial respiration, clear the airway and commence mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.
- Maintain body temperature with blankets. Be sure the victim does not become overheated.
- Never try to feed liquids to an unconscious person.

Be aware of exhaustion. Don't try to do too much at once. Set priorities and pace yourself. Get enough rest.

- Drink plenty of clean water. Eat well.
- Wear sturdy work boots and gloves.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and clean water often when working in debris.

Be aware of safety issues after a disaster.

- Be aware of new safety issues created by the disaster. Watch for washed out roads, contaminated buildings, contaminated water, gas leaks, broken glass, damaged electrical wiring and slippery floors.
- Inform local authorities about health and safety issues, including chemical spills, downed power lines, washed out roads, smoldering insulation and dead animals.

Returning Home

Returning home can be both physically and mentally challenging. Above all, use caution. You may be anxious to see your property but do not return to your home before the area is declared to be safe by local officials.



Inspect your home carefully before entering.

Walk carefully around the outside and check for loose power lines, gas leaks and structural damage. If you have any doubts about safety, have your residence inspected by a qualified building inspector or structural engineer before entering.

- Keep a battery-powered radio with you so you can listen for emergency updates and news reports.
- Use a battery-powered flash light to inspect a damaged home.
Note: The flashlight should be turned on outside before entering - the battery may produce a spark that could ignite leaking gas, if present.
- Watch out for animals, especially poisonous snakes. Use a stick to poke through debris.
- Use the phone only to report life-threatening emergencies.
- As you return home, watch for fallen objects; downed electrical wires; and weakened walls, bridges, roads and sidewalks.

Do not enter if:

- You smell gas.
- Floodwaters remain around the building.
- Your home was damaged by fire and the authorities have not declared it safe.

Be cautious when entering your home after a disaster.

When you go inside your home, there are certain things you should and should not do. Enter the home carefully and check for damage. Be aware of loose boards and slippery floors. The following items are other things to check inside your home:

- Natural gas. 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. Do not smoke or use oil, gas lanterns, candles or torches for lighting inside a damaged home until you are sure there is no leaking gas or other flammable materials present.

- Sparks, broken or frayed wires. Check the electrical system unless you are wet, standing in water or unsure of your safety. If possible, turn off the electricity at the main fuse box or circuit breaker. If the situation is unsafe, leave the building and call for help. Do not turn on the lights until you are sure they're safe to use. You may want to have an electrician inspect your wiring.
- Roof, foundation and chimney cracks. If it looks like the building may collapse, leave immediately.
- 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.
- Water and sewage systems. If pipes are damaged, turn off the main water valve. Check with local authorities before using any water; the water could be contaminated. Pump out wells and have the water tested by authorities before drinking. Do not flush toilets until you know that sewage lines are intact.
- Food and other supplies. Throw out all food and other supplies that you suspect may have become contaminated or come in to contact with floodwater.
- Your basement. If your basement has flooded, pump it out gradually (about one third of the 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.
- Open cabinets. Be alert for objects that may fall.
- Clean up household chemical spills. Disinfect items that may have been contaminated by raw sewage, bacteria, or chemicals. Also clean salvageable items.
- Call your insurance agent. Take pictures of damages. Keep good records of repair and cleaning costs.

Be wary of wildlife as you return home after a disaster.

Disaster and life threatening situations will exacerbate the unpredictable nature of wild animals. To protect yourself and your family, learn how to deal with wildlife.

Guidelines

- Do not corner wild animals or try to rescue them. Wild animals will likely feel threatened and may endanger themselves by dashing off into floodwaters, fire, and so forth. Call your local animal control office or wildlife resource office.
- Wild animals often seek higher ground which, during floods, eventually become submerged (i.e., island) and the animals become stranded. If the island is large enough and provides suitable shelter, you can leave food appropriate to the species (i.e., sunflower seeds for squirrels). Animals have a flight response and will flee from anyone approaching too closely. If the animal threatens to rush into the water, back away from the island or you may frighten the animal into jumping into the water to escape from you.
- Do not approach wild animals that have taken refuge in your home. Wild animals such as snakes, opossums and raccoons often seek refuge from floodwaters on upper levels of homes and have been known to remain after water recedes. If you encounter animals in this situation, open a window or provide another escape route and the animal will likely leave on its own. Do not attempt to capture or handle the animal. Should the animal stay, call your local animal control office or wildlife resource office.

- Beware of an increased number of snakes and other predators. These animals will try to feed on the carcasses of reptiles, amphibians and small mammals who have been drowned or crushed in their burrows or under rocks.
- Do not attempt to move a dead animal. Animal carcasses can present serious health risks. Outbreaks of anthrax, encephalitis and other diseases may occur. [Contact your local emergency management office](#) or health department for help and instructions.
- If bitten by an animal, seek immediate medical attention.

Seeking Disaster Assistance

Throughout the recovery period, it is 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.

Direct assistance to individuals and families may come from any number of organizations, including:

[American Red Cross](#)

- [Salvation Army](#)
- Local volunteer organizations

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. The federal government also has programs that help small businesses and farmers.

Most federal assistance becomes available when the President of the United States declares a “Major Disaster” for the affected area at the request of a state governor. FEMA will provide information through the media and community outreach about federal assistance and how to apply.

Grants and Assistance Programs for Individuals

Catalog of Federal Disaster Assistance (CFDA) numbers are provided to help you find additional information on the [CFDA website](#).

- [Disaster Assistance](#)
(CFDA Numbers: [97.048](#), [97.049](#), [97.050](#))
Provides money or direct assistance to individuals, families and businesses in an area whose property has been damaged or destroyed and whose losses are not covered by insurance.
- [Crisis Counseling](#)
(CFDA Number: [97.032](#))
Provides supplemental funding to States for short-term crisis counseling services to people affected in [Presidentially declared disasters](#).
- [Disaster Legal Services](#)
(CFDA Number: [97.033](#))
Provides free legal assistance to disaster victims.

- [Disaster Unemployment Assistance Program](#)
(CFDA Number: 97.034)
Provides unemployment benefits and re-employment services to individuals who have become unemployed because of major disasters.
- [National Flood Insurance Program](#)
(CFDA Number: 97.022)
Enables property owners in participating communities to purchase insurance as a protection against flood losses in exchange for State and community floodplain management regulations that reduce future flood damages.
- [View all FEMA grants](#)

Coping with Disaster

Disasters are upsetting experiences for everyone involved. 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, senior citizens, people with access or functional needs, and people for whom English is not their first language are especially at risk. Children may become afraid and some elderly people may seem disoriented at first. People with access or functional needs may require additional assistance.

Seek crisis counseling if you or someone in your family is experiencing issues with disaster-related stress.

Understand the individual effects of a disaster.

- Everyone who sees or experiences a disaster is affected by it in some way.
- 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 helps you heal.
- Accepting help from community programs and resources is healthy.
- Everyone has different needs and different ways of coping.
- It is common to want to strike back at people who have caused great pain.

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

Contact local faith-based organizations, voluntary agencies, or professional counselors for counseling. Additionally, [FEMA](#) and state and local governments of the affected area may provide crisis counseling assistance.

As you recover, it is a good idea to make sure that you have updated your family disaster plan and [replenished essential disaster supplies](#) just in case a disaster happens again. You will always feel better knowing that you are prepared and ready for anything.

Seek counseling if you or a family member are experiencing disaster-related stress.

Recognize Signs of Disaster-Related Stress

When adults have the following signs, they might need crisis counseling or stress management assistance:

- Difficulty communicating thoughts.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Difficulty maintaining balance in their lives.
- Low threshold of frustration.
- 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 easy bouts of crying.
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt.
- Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone.

Talk to someone and seek professional help for disaster-related stress.

The following are 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.
- Do not hold yourself responsible for the disastrous event or be frustrated because you feel you cannot help directly in the rescue work.
- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing by healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation and meditation.
- Maintain a normal family and daily routine, limiting demanding responsibilities on yourself and your family.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Participate in memorials.
- Use existing support groups of family, friends and religious institutions.

Ensure you are ready for future events by restocking your [disaster supplies kits](#) and updating your [family disaster plan](#). Doing these positive actions can be comforting.

Disasters can leave children feeling frightened, confused, and insecure. Whether a child has personally experienced trauma, has merely seen the event on television or has 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 may respond to disaster by demonstrating fears, sadness or behavioral problems. Younger children may return to earlier behavior patterns, such as bedwetting, sleep problems and separation anxiety. Older children may also display anger, aggression, school problems or withdrawal. Some children who have only indirect contact with the disaster but witness it on television may develop distress.

Recognize Risk Factors

For many children, reactions to disasters are brief and represent normal reactions to "abnormal events." A smaller number of children can be at risk for more enduring psychological distress as a function of three major risk factors:

- Direct exposure to the disaster, such as being evacuated, observing injuries or death of others, or experiencing injury along with fearing one's life is in danger.
- Loss/grief: This relates to the death or serious injury of family or friends.
- On-going stress from the secondary effects of disaster, such as temporarily living elsewhere, loss of friends and social networks, loss of personal property, parental unemployment, and costs incurred during recovery to return the family to pre-disaster life and living conditions.

Vulnerabilities in Children

In most cases, depending on the risk factors above, distressing responses are temporary. In the absence of severe threat to life, injury, loss of loved ones, or secondary problems such as loss of home, moves, etc., symptoms usually diminish over time. For those that were directly exposed to the disaster, reminders of the disaster such as high winds, smoke, cloudy skies, sirens, or other reminders of the disaster may cause upsetting feelings to return. Having a prior history of some type of traumatic event or severe stress may contribute to these feelings.

Children's coping with disaster or emergencies is often tied to the way parents cope. They can detect adults' fears and sadness. Parents and adults can make disasters less traumatic for children by taking steps to manage their own feelings and plans for coping. Parents are almost always the best source of support for children in disasters. One way to establish a sense of control and to build confidence in children before a disaster is to engage and involve them in preparing a family disaster plan. After a disaster, children can contribute to a family recovery plan.

Meeting the Child's Emotional Needs

Children's reactions are influenced by the behavior, thoughts, and feelings of adults. Adults should encourage children and adolescents to share their thoughts and feelings about the incident. Clarify misunderstandings about risk and danger by listening to children's concerns and answering questions.

Maintain a sense of calm by validating children's concerns and perceptions and with discussion of concrete plans for safety.

Listen to what the child is saying. If a young child is asking questions about the event, answer them simply without the elaboration needed for an older child or adult. Some children are comforted by knowing more or less information than others; decide what level of information your particular child needs. If a child has difficulty expressing feelings, allow the child to draw a picture or tell a story of what happened.

Try to understand what is causing anxieties and fears. Be aware that following a disaster, children are most afraid that:

- The event will happen again.
- Someone close to them will be killed or injured.
- They will be left alone or separated from the family.

Reassuring Children After a Disaster

Suggestions to help reassure children include the following:

- Personal contact is reassuring. Hug and touch your children.
- Calmly provide factual information about the recent disaster and current plans for insuring their safety along with recovery plans.
- Encourage your children to talk about their feelings.
- Spend extra time with your children such as at bedtime.
- Re-establish your daily routine for work, school, play, meals, and rest.
- Involve your children by giving them specific chores to help them feel they are helping to restore family and community life.
- Praise and recognize responsible behavior.
- Understand that your children will have a range of reactions to disasters.
- Encourage your children to help update your a family disaster plan.

If you have tried to create a reassuring environment by following the steps above, but your child continues to exhibit stress, if the reactions worsen over time, or if they cause interference with daily behavior at school, at home, or with other relationships, it may be appropriate to talk to a professional. You can get professional help from the child's primary care physician, a mental health provider specializing in children's needs, or a member of the clergy.

Monitor and Limit Exposure to the Media

News coverage related to a disaster may elicit fear and confusion and arouse anxiety in children. This is particularly true for large-scale disasters or a terrorist event where significant property damage and loss of life has occurred. Particularly for younger children, repeated images of an event may cause them to believe the event is recurring over and over.

If parents allow children to watch television or use the Internet where images or news about the disaster are shown, parents should be with them to encourage communication and provide explanations. This may also include parent's monitoring and appropriately limiting their own exposure to anxiety-provoking information.

Use Support Networks

Parents help their children when they take steps to understand and manage their own feelings and ways of coping. They can do this by building and using social support systems of family, friends, community organizations and agencies, faith-based institutions, or other resources that work for that family.

Parents can build their own unique social support systems so that in an emergency situation or when a disaster strikes, they can be supported and helped to manage their reactions. As a result, parents will be more available to their children and better able to support them. Parents are almost always the best source of support for children in difficult times. But to support their children, parents need to attend to their own needs and have a plan for their own support.

Preparing for disaster helps everyone in the family accept the fact that disasters do happen, and provides an opportunity to identify and collect the resources needed to meet basic needs after disaster. Preparation helps; when people feel prepared, they cope better and so do children.

[A Child's Reaction to Disaster by Age](#)

Below are common reactions in children after a disaster or traumatic event.

Birth through 2 years. When children are pre-verbal and experience a trauma, they do not have the words to describe the event or their feelings. However, they can retain memories of particular sights, sounds, or smells. Infants may react to trauma by being irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled. The biggest influence on children of this age is how their parents cope. As children get older, their play may involve acting out elements of the traumatic event that occurred several years in the past and was seemingly forgotten.

Preschool - 3 through 6 years. Preschool children often feel helpless and powerless in the face of an overwhelming event. Because of their age and small size, they lack the ability to protect themselves or others. As a result, they feel intense fear and insecurity about being separated from caregivers. Preschoolers cannot grasp the concept of permanent loss. They can see consequences as being reversible or permanent. In the weeks following a traumatic event, preschoolers' play activities may reenact the incident or the disaster over and over again.

School age - 7 through 10 years. The school-age child has the ability to understand the permanence of loss. Some children become intensely preoccupied with the details of a traumatic event and want to talk about it continually. This preoccupation can interfere with the child's concentration at school and academic performance may decline. At school, children may hear inaccurate information from peers. They may display a wide range of reactions — sadness, generalized fear, or specific fears of the disaster happening again, guilt over action or inaction during the disaster, anger that the event was not prevented, or fantasies of playing rescuer.

Pre-adolescence to adolescence - 11 through 18 years. As children grow older, they develop a more sophisticated understanding of the disaster event. Their responses are more similar to adults. Teenagers may become involved in dangerous, risk-taking behaviors, such as reckless driving, or alcohol or drug use. Others can become fearful of leaving home and avoid previous levels of activities. Much of adolescence is focused on moving out into the world. After a trauma, the view of the world can seem more dangerous and unsafe. A teenager may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions and yet feel unable to discuss them with others.

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:

Financial contributions to a recognized disaster relief organization are the most effective donation to make.

- Most needed and the most efficient way of helping those impacted by disaster.
- Allow voluntary organizations to fund response and recovery efforts, obtain goods and services locally, and provide direct financial assistance to disaster survivors to meet their own needs.
- Make a financial contribution to the voluntary organization of your choice.
- If you need help in determining who to give to, National Voluntary Organization Active in Disaster website has a list of major non-profits that are active in disaster work or you can make your offer through the [National Donations Management Network](#).

When the public supports these voluntary organizations with financial contributions, it helps ensure a steady flow of important services to the people in need after a disaster.

Volunteer with local organizations to aid disaster victims.

Volunteer with a recognized organization involved in disaster response and recovery prior to the next disaster event.

- Volunteer with a non-profit organization and be trained before the next event to find meaningful volunteer opportunities following a disaster.
- There are many organizations and faith-based groups in your community that have active disaster programs and need volunteers
- These groups offer a wide range of services following a disaster:

www.nvoad.org

www.serve.gov

www.citizencorps.gov

www.helpindisaster.org

www.networkforgood.org

The generosity and kindness of people around the country does a lot to help communities heal from the tragic consequences of disasters.

Learn ways that you can effectively help others after a disaster.

Confirm what is needed BEFORE taking action!

- Donate in-kind goods that are specifically requested or needed by recognized organizations.
- Unsolicited donated goods such as used clothing, miscellaneous household items, and mixed or perishable foodstuffs require helping agencies to redirect valuable resources away from providing services to sort, package, transport, warehouse, and distribute items that may not meet the needs of disaster survivors.
- Confirm the needs by contacting the voluntary organization of your choice before starting to collect.
- If you have a quantity of a given item or class of item to donate, and you need help in determining which organizations to give to, you can make your offer through the [National Donations Management Network](#).



Everyone is moved when they hear the news that disaster has struck a community. By learning the best ways to donate and volunteer, we can all make a huge difference in the lives of those affected.

This information is taken from: <http://www.ready.gov/recovering-disaster>

This and other training modules from this website will be helpful to your family and you as an ARES member. It might be advisable to print these modules out and keep them in a binder for your family to be able to refer to in your absence. Being prepared is no accident.

