

After a disaster ...

Make connections. It's easy to feel alone in your worries and other reactions. Connecting with close family members, friends and neighbors can be a source of strength and support. By discussing some of the challenges you are experiencing, you may discover you are not alone. You may learn how others are managing similar experiences and incorporate some of those strategies. Sometimes after disasters, local support groups are offered by appropriately trained and experienced professionals. People can feel a sense of relief and comfort by connecting with other flood survivors who have had similar reactions and emotions. Another way to make connections is to reach out and help others who are also managing flood-related challenges. Helping others can give you a sense of accomplishment and self-worth.

Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems. You can't stop the flood waters, but you can change how you interpret and respond to them. Try to see beyond the current crisis to how future circumstances may be a little better. Note any subtle ways in which you might already feel better as you make progress containing water damage or cleaning up following the flood.

Take a news break. Watching replays of flood footage can increase your distress. Often, the media tries to interest viewers by presenting worst-case scenarios. These may or may not be representative of what's happening to your home or community.

Accept that change is a part of living. Certain goals may no longer be attainable because of your home and community being flooded. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can change.

Move toward your goals. Develop some realistic goals. Do something regularly — even if it seems like a small accomplishment — that enables you to move toward your goals. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself, "What's one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?"

Take decisive actions. Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive actions, rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away. Although floods can uproot people from their normal routines, establish new routines as soon as you can, even if they may have to change again once the flood and clean-up are over.

Look for opportunities for self-discovery. People often learn something about themselves and may find that they have grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, greater sense of strength, increased sense of self-worth, a more developed spirituality, and heightened appreciation for life.

Nurture a positive view of yourself. You are persevering through difficult circumstances. That's an accomplishment. Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts helps build resilience.

Maintain a hopeful outlook. An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear. Even when facing significant water damage and a long flood clean-up, try to consider these stressful circumstances in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. You've tackled past hardships that may have felt overwhelming at the time. Tap into those successful skills to get through current challenges.

Take care of yourself. Engage in healthy behaviors that will enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Be patient in the midst of the chaos. You may not feel like it, but eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience difficulties sleeping, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol

and drugs since these can increase feelings of sadness or distress and hamper your progress in successfully managing current circumstances.

For many people, using the resilience-building strategies described above may be sufficient to get through the current crisis. At times, however, an individual can get stuck or have difficulty managing intense reactions. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can help you develop an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if you are having trouble functioning or performing basic activities of daily living. You can find psychologists near you by contacting your Texas Psychological Association at www.texaspsyc.org.

Children:

For children, disasters can create intense anxiety and fear. This is particularly true if family members or friends were injured or died or if a child is separated from his or her family during the storm. A child's distress may manifest itself in a variety of ways, including experiencing nightmares or fear of going to sleep, unusual outbursts or tantrums, or withdrawing and becoming more solitary.

Caring adults can help alleviate the emotional consequences of trauma by doing the following . . .

Spend more time with children and let them be more dependent on you during the months following the trauma — for example, allowing your child to cling to you more often than usual. Physical affection is very comforting to children who have experienced trauma.

Provide play experiences to help relieve tension. Younger children in particular may find it easier to share their ideas and feelings about the event through nonverbal activities such as drawing.

Be available and encourage older children to ask questions they may have, as well as sharing their thoughts and feelings with you and with one another. This helps reduce their confusion and anxiety related to the trauma. Respond to questions in terms they can comprehend. Reassure them repeatedly that you care about them and that you understand their fears and concerns.

Keep regular schedules for activities such as eating, playing and going to bed to help restore a sense of security and normalcy, even if your family has been relocated to a shelter or other temporary housing.

Provide safe opportunities for children to help others — helping others offers a sense of control and can help children feel better about themselves.

Reduce the number of times children see the trauma on the news. Repeatedly watching broadcasts of the disaster can re-traumatize children.

When should parents seek professional help for their children?

Many children are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by a natural disaster by using their own support systems. It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems persist and continue to interfere with daily living. With children, continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the traumatic event, continued and extreme withdrawal, and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents understand and deal with thoughts, feelings and behaviors that result from trauma.

For more resources, please go to <http://apa.org/helpcenter>.