

Responses to Disaster

People go through different psychological phases in response to natural disaster such as Houston's current catastrophic flooding. It is helpful to know about these stages so that you can know what to expect for you and your loved ones. Here are the stages and what people experience in each phase:

Heroic Phase: This period usually occurs at the time of the disaster and immediately afterward. People respond to demands for heroic action to save their own and other's lives and property. A great deal of energy is expended helping others survive and recover. There are countless examples of courage, generosity, and support. People focus on the immediate survival needs

Honeymoon Phase: This period typically begins one week after the disaster and can last six months. Those who have survived have a strong sense of having shared and lived through a catastrophic experience with others. People feel supported and encouraged by official agencies who promise assistance. The cleanup process begins with an anticipation that more help will be available.

Disillusionment Phase: This period may last from two months to two or more years. If promises of aid are not fulfilled as expected, strong feelings of anger, resentment, and bitterness may occur. Outside agencies need to leave, and local community groups may weaken. There may be a gradual loss of the sense of shared community as victims concentrate on rebuilding on their own. People may feel isolated and communities can become divided and hostile.

Reconstruction Phase: This phase generally lasts for several years following the disaster. Victims have come to realize that they need to rebuild their own lives, homes, farms, and businesses with little assistance from others. They have gradually assumed responsibility for rebuilding their own lives. Signs of progress are evident, new buildings, construction projects, and new programs and plans. These all reaffirm people's belief in their community and in their own capabilities. Community groups with long-term investment in the community become key elements during this phase.

What you can expect:

Once a family has moved back into their home they may experience mixed emotions: feelings of relief and joy as well as sadness and fear. Sadness is usually due to reminders of things lost. These feelings are all normal. Many events may cause feelings of sadness during the first year following a disaster. Birthdays, holidays, and anniversary of the disaster often remind people of how things used to be and the things that have been changed or lost. It is important to have an opportunity to grieve for things that were lost. Family relationships may become strained from all of the stress. Couples may be hurt and wonder why they are not getting along, are not feeling close, or are thinking of separating. People may grieve differently. Developmentally, children may regress at this time and revert to bed wetting, thumb sucking, and have more frequent temper tantrums, sleep disturbances, night terrors, persistent fears about natural events, fears of future disasters, and loss of interest in school.

Adults may experience more fatigue, difficulty sleeping, or bad dreams. It is important to recognize that ordinary life stresses are exaggerated in the aftermath of disasters. While some problems will appear immediately, others appear several months later. Adults will respond to stress differently than children. Listen to children. **Children** have a right to their feelings;

feelings are normal. Acknowledge feelings first, then provide simple and accurate information in response to their questions.

Older adults may experience despair, mourning, apathy, withdrawal, anger, irritability, or confusion when family routines are disrupted by the disaster. Despair may accompany loss of property and objects, which is a loss of ties to the past. Older adults have more memories and memorabilia to lose. They may feel that it is too late to late in life to start over. Retirement savings may be spent out to repair homes. Frail, vulnerable elders may be at risk of institutionalization if their homes are damaged beyond repair. Forced displacement can result in disorientation and depression.

What can be done?

Although these reactions to natural disasters and stress are normal, they can create problems that cause more stress. Therefore, victims of disaster may want to try some of the following things to help alleviate stress.

- 1) Actively and assertively seek competent information to solve problems as they arise. Don't hesitate to seek help and advice, whether it is for direct flood relief or for the emotional aftermath.
- 2) Take time off from worries and home repairs by going to the movies, enjoying a favorite hobby, or relaxing. Take some time away from home to be with family or friends.
- 3) Continue talking about your feelings and experiences when you are ready although do not allow others to force you to retell your stories.
- 4) Couples need to devote time to their relationship. It is important to have time alone, to talk to each other and to have fun together. Don't take out anger on each other.
- 5) Exercise, play a sport or enjoy other physical activity that is not disaster related. Exercise releases pent-up frustrations and increases overall endurance.
- 6) Attend to your health. Eat a healthy diet and get enough sleep. This will increase your ability to deal with stress. and can lessen your feelings of helplessness and build peace of mind.
- 7) Try to identify positive aspects of the flood: meeting neighbors for the first time, working together, developing community spirit.
- 8) If problems persist, seek assistance from your local mental health professional, counselor, or member of clergy.

At times, it may seem that the problems and stress resulting from the flood will never end. However, continuing problems are not the only thing to anticipate. People, and the community as a whole, will move into the reconstruction phase - the rebuilding of our lives. With a lot of work and some time, the effects of the flood will grow more distant and there will be signs of continued caring and healing in the community.

This article was adapted from the following sources.

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Michael C. Heil Extension Assistant, Rural Mental Health Project