



Helping Older Adults and People with Disabilities Cope After a Disaster

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“No matter the natural disaster I’ve covered, whether it’s a wildfire or flood, I always come back with a much greater perspective.”

-Ginger Zee, ABC News Meteorologist

Natural disasters are devastating, especially if they directly affect you or people you care about. Some disasters can force people to evacuate, relocate, or rebuild. People can lose their homes, possessions, routines, and way of living. Lingering memories of the disaster and the grief associated with loss can haunt people. It is common for survivors to experience disbelief, guilt, anxiety, depression, fear, withdrawal, and have trouble sleeping or eating.

Older adults and people with disabilities are among those at most risk for facing life-threatening challenges during evacuation. They are also the most physically and psychologically vulnerable when it comes to recovery, according to the American Psychological Association (APA). Older adults and people with disabilities have more chronic medical conditions, disability, and impairment. Post-disaster, those factors pose challenges such as running out of medication, not being able to manage a special diet, lack of access to medical devices like oxygen, not being able to stand in long lines for service or supplies, and lack of accessible shelters for people with disabilities. As a result, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

(SAMHSA) reports that people with disabilities describe more signs of distress after a disaster than those without.

In addition, the APA reports that disruption to place, sense of safety, routine, and other aspects of one's social and physical environment is traumatic. For some, their first line of support includes friends, family, and neighbors. These people play an important role during evacuation and recovery. Others rely on resources like Meals on Wheels, home health, and adult day programs. In the face of disaster, it is common for both informal and formal support networks to be disrupted. Family and friends may not be able to help because of their own circumstances and various services may be on pause.

Older adults and people with disabilities may be at higher risk for experiencing behavioral or emotional changes because of interruption to medical needs, place, and routine. Those with various mental or cognitive disabilities may be at greater risk for added confusion and fear. It is important for caregivers, community members, and rescuers to watch for things like confusion, infection, injury, and dehydration. It is also important to take notice of post-traumatic stress such as nightmares or adverse reactions to noise and darkness.

Warning Signs of Stress

Everyone copes with trauma differently. The SAMHSA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have specifically named this list of warning signs for older adults who may need more help with their stress and coping:

- trouble with thinking clearly, remembering, decision-making, and communicating
- problems with sleeping
- substance use (drugs or excessive alcohol)
- reduced attention span
- increased confusion
- excessive worrying
- headaches and stomach pains
- disorientation or confusion
- unwillingness or reluctance to leave home
- overwhelming guilt, self-doubt
- fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone

The APA reports other common reactions and responses to disasters:

- Heightened sensitivity to loud noises, sirens, smells, and other sensations that trigger reactions associated with the disaster. Triggers can increase fear and anxiety.
- Strained relationships. Post-disaster, people might be moody, engage in disagreements, and become withdrawn, disconnected, or disengaged from social activities.
- Powerful and impulsive feelings like feeling more worried, guilty, irritable, angry, anxious, sad, nervous, stressed, or overwhelmed than usual.

How to Cope with Disaster-Related Stress

To help cope with the stress and aftermath of a natural disaster, SAMHSA and APA recommend that people try this list of specific actions:

- Take time to adjust and mourn the loss.
- Be patient with your emotions.
- Talk about your feelings.
- Establish or reestablish daily routines.
- Ask for help from people who care and will understand your situation.
- Don't hold yourself responsible or blame yourself for the disaster.
- Avoid feelings of frustration, burden, or guilt because you are unable to help with rescue efforts.
- Promote physical and emotional healing by staying active in daily life routines or adjusting them to find a new normal.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle focus (nutrition, physical activity, rest, relaxation, and meditation).
- Connect with people, especially those who are meaningful.
- Participate in the community in ways that promote feelings of comfort, productivity, purpose, and meaning.
- Stay socially connected. Reach out to family, friends, community members, or formal support groups.
- Establish an emergency plan or revisit existing plans.
- Do something versus nothing when possible.

- Communicate your experience by talking, journaling, or engaging in a creative activity.
- Avoid making important or major life decisions.
- Seek professional help from a health-care or mental health professional if you feel hopeless and cannot get through your daily responsibilities and activities of daily living.

SAMHSA offers free counseling through its Disaster Distress Hotlines. The lines are open 24/7 365 days a year. The hotlines give immediate counseling by trained professionals to those experiencing emotional distress related to natural and man-made disasters. Counselors will talk through disaster-related experiences and their effects on individuals and family. They will offer tips for coping and make referrals to local crisis centers. They also offer a Disaster Survivors with Disabilities Hotline. Call or text 1-800-985-5990, or visit disasterdistress.samhsa.gov.

First Steps after a Natural Disaster

According to Ready.gov, recovery from a natural disaster is a gradual process. You should consider the following steps as you begin the recovery process:

- Reconnect with key family, loved ones, and other important people in your life and community to reduce stress and encourage recovery. If living alone, connect to proper health care, friends, volunteers, organizations, etc., that help support your activities of daily living.
- Get your prescriptions refilled. To find an open pharmacy after a disaster, go to RxOpen.org. This website lists information on facilities in areas a natural disaster has affected so people can access necessary medication.
- Contact your local emergency management agency to let officials know you have damage and need immediate help.
- If you have insurance, contact your agent to file a claim. Take photos and make a list before you begin to clean. Save all receipts related to the disaster cleanup.



- Seek resources. Some recommended resources include:
 - a. DisasterAssistance.gov connects disaster survivors with local information, support, and services. It also guides you to a way of accessing and applying for disaster aid. Again, taking before and after photos of property damage can accelerate the process.
 - b. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offers public aid to help disaster survivors with basic needs which may include things like temporary safe housing, lodging reimbursement, home repair help, personal property aid, transportation assistance, medical and dental assistance, etc. The FEMA Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) Locator can help you find local DRCs, which are accessible facilities set up in areas after a disaster to help people apply for aid, learn about resources, understand FEMA correspondence, learn the status of FEMA applications, get referrals to other agencies, learn about rental assistance information, etc.
 - c. FEMA's Office of Disability Integration and Coordination helps people with disabilities before, during, and after disasters. Call Toll-free at 800-621-FEMA (3362). For TTY, call 800-462-7585.
 - d. United Way 211. 211 specialists can

connect callers — before and after a disaster — with the help they need. They help people find evacuation routes, shelters, etc. They help people get food, water, and supplies afterward. They focus on long-term disaster recovery. Learn more at <https://www.unitedway.org/recovery#>.

- e. Administration on Aging (AoA) Eldercare Locator. The Eldercare Locator lists services for older adults and their families. Contact them at <https://eldercare.acl.gov> or by phone at 1-800-677-1116.
- Do not return home until local officials say it is safe to return.
- Use caution if you are returning home. Take a flashlight, wear protective clothing, including gloves, boots, and face coverings. Maintain your health and safety first. Do not enter if you smell gas, smoke, or if floodwaters still stand around the property. Be careful of debris.
- Watch out for animals, including poisonous snakes, which may be hiding in debris.
- Do not move any seriously injured people unless they are in immediate danger of death or more injury.
- Beware of individuals and companies taking advantage of people recovering from disasters. Do not feel pressured to sign on for services; instead get multiple bids if you can. Make sure contractors or workers are licensed, bonded, and insured. Do not make advanced payments and make final payment only when work is complete based on the contract.

Distress and feelings of increased vulnerability are common among older adults and those with disabilities who experience a natural disaster. Planning ahead is the key to disaster recovery. It is important to consider your abilities and resources to support your needs before, during, and after a natural disaster.

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Resources:

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- Administration on Aging (AoA) Eldercare Locator. The Eldercare Locator lists services for older adults and their families. <https://eldercare.acl.gov> or by phone at 1-800-677-1116
- American Red Cross. <https://www.redcross.org/> 1-800-733-2767 Volunteers and staff deliver vital services in relief efforts and support.

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Federal Emergency Management Authority (FEMA) <https://www.fema.gov/> FEMA, an agency under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, gives information on how to prepare and recover from disasters. FEMA Fact Sheet. (2021). <https://www.fema.gov/fact-sheet/fema-assistance-after-disaster> FEMA. Office of Disability and Integration. (2022). <https://www.fema.gov/about/offices/disability> Call FEMA's Helpline for questions about help FEMA offers, how to apply for help, your account, etc. 1-800-621-3362 (711 available) FEMA Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) Locator. <https://gateway.fema.gov/ESF6/DRCLocator>

National Institute on Aging (NIA). (n.d.). Disaster Preparedness and Recovery for Older Adults. "Evaluate and plan, Stock an emergency kit, Consider medical needs, Plan for an efficient evacuation, and Learn about recovery assistance." In addition, there is a list of resources for more information about disaster preparedness. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/disaster-preparedness-and-recovery-older-adults>

Ready.gov "is a national public service campaign of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that is designed to educate and empower the American people to prepare for, respond to and mitigate emergencies, including natural and man-made disasters. The goal of the campaign is to promote preparedness through public involvement." <https://www.ready.gov/>

SAMHSA Helping Older Adults After Disasters: A Guide to Providing Support. https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/pep19-01-01-001_0.pdf

SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline. 24/7, 365 days-a-year. Call or text at 1-800-985-5990. ASL support is available 24/7. "The Disaster Distress Helpline puts people in need of counseling on the path to recovery. ...staff members provide counseling and support before, during, and after disasters and refer people to local disaster-related resources for follow-up care and support."

RxOpen.org: This website lists open pharmacies after a disaster.

United Way 211: <https://www.unitedway.org/recovery#> 211 specialists will connect you to resources before and after a disaster.

**This publication is part of the
"In the Face of Disaster" Publication Series:**

- Preparing Your Family and Home Before a Natural Disaster
- Protecting Your Family and Home After a Natural Disaster
- Considerations for Food and Water Before a Natural Disaster
- Keeping Food and Water Safe After a Natural Disaster
- Financial Considerations Before a Natural Disaster
- Financial Management After a Natural Disaster
- Considerations for Older Adults and People with Disabilities Before a Disaster
- Helping Older Adults and People with Disabilities Cope After a Disaster
- Navigating Trauma After a Natural Disaster

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