

## Helping Natural Disaster Survivors Recover from Trauma

Natural disasters are severe weather events that result in death or tremendous damage to physical structures and environments. When severe weather events occur, individuals and communities are more likely to experience trauma. Trauma is our body's response to experiencing emotionally hurtful or physically life-threatening events beyond our control, like a natural disaster. When a community experiences a natural disaster, every person is at risk for trauma, even if they do not lose family, friends, or belongings. Trauma can cause severe emotional and physical problems after the natural disaster and months and years later. In many cases, individuals who experience trauma may not recognize the signs of trauma. For those trying to help, it is essential to understand and recognize the signs and use a trauma-informed approach to helping.

### How does trauma affect the body?

When an individual experiences trauma, it activates their sympathetic nervous system, which we will call the survival system. The survival system is designed to keep us alive, such as during a natural disaster. Once the survival system is activated, the brain signals the body to pump out stress hormones. These hormones divert blood flow to the heart, lungs, liver, and muscles and prepare us to fight or flee (survive). Once we experience the trauma of the event, our survival system does not readily shut off. That leads to traumatic stress. Traumatic stress can impair a person's ability to make decisions and cope. Even thinking or hearing about the traumatic event activates the survival system weeks or months after it occurred.

### What are common signs of trauma?

- Feeling angry, irritable, or bitter
- Problems focusing or feeling confused
- Isolating from family or friends
- Avoiding places that bring back painful memories of the event.
- Easily startled or scared
- Sadness
- Intense grief for weeks and months
- Recurrent thoughts about the disaster
- Difficulty sleeping or having nightmares about the disaster
- Headaches and/or fatigue
- Heart racing when thinking about the event
- Worrying more or fearful about future disasters
- Upset stomach

### How do we help people who experience trauma?

Helping people who experience trauma because of a natural disaster does not require specialized training but requires us to be informed. Below you will find some essential tips for helping people cope with trauma after a natural disaster.

**Tip No. 1: Interactions should be compassionate, calm, and helpful.** When working with persons who experience trauma, recognize that they may be in shock and their survival system is active. People might be angry, crying, or fearful. People might be unable to verbalize their needs. It's important to listen, speak calmly, and keep an open posture.

**Tip No. 2: Prioritize safety and basic needs.** Prioritize safety and shelter to help reduce stress and restore a sense of normalcy and routine. When working on safety and shelter, be practical and connect individuals with up-to-date information and resources. Information and resources can include safety information, where to get safe food, finding transportation to a shelter like a school, or providing them with additional clothing. Connecting people with responders, medical care, and counselors or therapists is vital, especially if you observe signs of trauma or physical injury.

Physical safety and meeting basic needs are the most crucial aspect of **Tip No. 2**, which should include:

- **Food:** undamaged, nonperishable items or food provided during relief efforts
- **Water:** bottled water or other prepackaged juices or sodas
- **Clothing:** dry clothing, including socks, shoes, pants, a shirt, and a jacket or coat
- **Shelter:** shelter in an undamaged or affected structure like a school, church, or mobile shelter
- **Safety:** to prevent further injury or loss of life. Discuss avoiding running water, damaged structures, or downed power lines. Minimize exposure to flood waters. Discourage going out after curfew, entering damaged structures, or being out at night to prevent exposure to hazards.
- **Ask:** What else do they need?

**Tip No. 3: Look for signs of trauma and provide support.** People might not hear you or acknowledge the information that you provide. Individuals might feel helpless and be unable to problem solve or follow simple directions. They may also suddenly begin crying or become overwhelmed with emotion. You can provide support by doing some simple things, and avoiding others:

- Tell them you care about them.
- Actively listen to them.
- Connect them with family, friends, and other resources.
- Empathize, but avoid statements like “I understand what you are going through.”
- **DO NOT** make promises such as, “We will find everyone,” or “We will recover what you lost.”
- **DO NOT** ask or try to force someone to share their experience or story, which can retraumatize them.

**Tip No. 4: Give information about coping and connect with professional helpers.**

Providing knowledge about coping and helping connect people with professional helpers is essential to trauma recovery. By doing so, you help deactivate the survival system and can help restore a sense of calm. Information about coping can include tips on caring for themselves and others who experience a natural disaster. These include:

- **Encouraging and helping restore routine:** Restoring and establishing a routine to cope with trauma is vital because it provides a sense of empowerment and normalcy. Routines can include eating at the same time each day, taking time to rest, and talking with someone you trust each day. Going to sleep and waking up at the same times also help restore our daily rhythm. Keep tasks simple.

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- **Encourage acknowledgement of emotions:** It is normal to feel angry, sad, tired, helpless, and worried because of traumatic stress from a natural disaster. Encourage people to go easy on themselves and make room for painful emotions. Crying is OK.
- **Remain flexible:** After a natural disaster, changes occur. We can remain flexible when working with people recovering from a natural disaster. We can also help people differentiate situations they can control from uncontrollable ones.
- **Seek professional help:** It is important to connect people experiencing trauma after a natural disaster to professional helpers. A helper can be a doctor, trained crisis responder, counselor, or nurse. You can also connect individuals with our state crisis line.
  - **Signs of crisis:** panic attacks, substance misuse, expressing feelings of hopelessness, social isolation, and suicide behaviors. Crisis can occur at any time after a traumatic event, but sometimes one to three months afterward.



Source: Paul Norrod, DrPH, RN, Extension specialist for Rural Health and Farm Safety

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