



# Navigating Trauma After a Natural Disaster

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Life is fraught with difficult and scary situations. Sometimes certain events are beyond your control and overload your ability to deal with them physically and psychologically. An unfortunate and frightening example of such events includes natural disasters. When natural disasters happen, you might be devastated. You might lose loved ones, friends, personal possessions, or critical parts of your community. Tragic events can leave you in shock and feeling hopeless and helpless. You can learn to recognize and address the warning signs of trauma during the recovery from a natural disaster. In doing so, you can begin to cope with the trauma and eventually grow stronger for yourself, your family, friends, and your community.

## Trauma Defined

Trauma is your body's response when you experience an event that is life-threatening or emotionally hurtful. When you experience trauma, it can leave lasting effects on your mental and physical well-being. It could produce warning signs of physical or mental changes that you might not immediately recognize. A simple way to think about trauma is to consider the most stress you can handle in response to an uncontrollable event. In many cases, the event disrupts your ability to cope because of the significant loss of relationships and things necessary to meet your physical and emotional needs.

## How Does Trauma Affect the Body?

When you experience trauma, it activates your sympathetic nervous system. We will call it the survival system. The survival system is designed to keep you 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. They also prepare you to fight or flee (survive). Once you experience the trauma of the event, your 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.

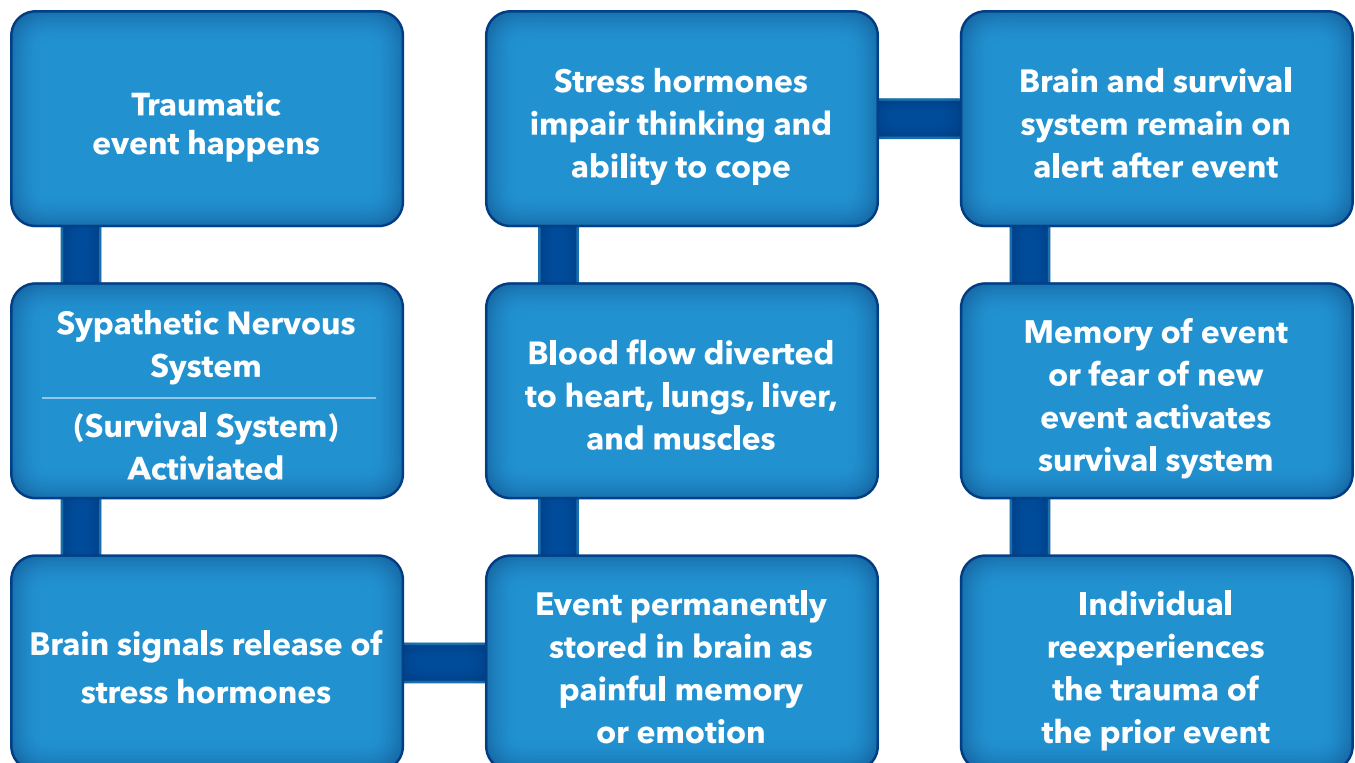
## Signs of Trauma

When you experience trauma, it is helpful to remember that you are under extreme stress. Because of the trauma and stress, your brain puts you into survival mode (fight, flight, or freeze). This helps keep you alive but can impair your ability to recognize the signs of

trauma and recover. Most people experience powerful emotional and physical responses immediately after the traumatic event, and in many cases, for months or years afterward. The initial and long-term signs of trauma after a natural disaster can differ based on the events and experiences of the individual. Below are some immediate and long-term signs of trauma to help you recognize them.

### Immediate Signs of Trauma (less than 3 months after event)

- Feeling numb or like nothing is real
- Problems focusing or feeling confused
- Easily startled or scared
- Intense anger or sadness
- Heart racing when thinking about the event
- Difficulty sleeping or having nightmares about the disaster
- Headaches and/or fatigue
- Feeling worried or fearful
- Digestive problems, like upset stomach, nausea, or diarrhea



### Long-term Signs of Trauma (more than 3 months after event)

- Feeling irritable or bitter
- Difficulty thinking or making decisions
- Socially isolating from family or friends
- Avoiding places or things that bring back painful memories of the event
- Easily startled or scared by certain sights or sounds
- Problems completing work tasks
- Recurrent thoughts about the disaster or future disasters
- Difficulty sleeping, unable to sleep, or sleeping too much
- Fatigue
- Worrying or fearful about future disasters
- Digestive problems
- Intense grief for weeks and months

## Coping with Trauma

Coping with trauma can sound difficult when trying to recover from a natural disaster, especially if you feel helpless or hopeless. Several tips below can help you, your friends, family, and the community handle trauma and the stress brought on by the natural disaster. As you consider following the tips below, remember that recovery is possible!

### Tip No. 1: Prioritize Basic Needs

- **Food:** Undamaged, nonperishable or food provided during relief efforts.
- **Safety:** Avoid running water, damaged structures, or downed power lines. Minimize exposure to flood waters. Avoid going out after curfew or at night to prevent exposure to hazards like downed power lines.
- **Water:** Bottled water or other prepackaged juices or sodas.
- **Clothing:** If possible, obtain or keep a set of dry clothes, including socks and a jacket or coat.
- **Shelter:** Take shelter in an undamaged or unaffected structure like a school, church, or mobile shelter.



### Tip No. 2: Care for Yourself, Care for Others

- Use compassion and caring in dealing with others.
- Offer supportive words to yourself and others.
- Spend time or reach out to family and friends daily.
- Avoid the use of alcohol or drugs.
- Reduce or avoid consumption of news.
- Delay making major life decisions.
- Acknowledge your emotions. One day, you may feel angry, then feel overwhelmed or sad.
- Give yourself grace. Feeling sad, worried, and angry is OK.
- Try to get “good” sleep.
- Remain flexible. Changes will occur.
- Seek professional support from a physician or counselor.

### Tip No. 3: Restore Your Routine

- Eat at the same time each day.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Take time for rest to boost your recovery.
- If possible, take your medicines.
- Take time to grieve.
- Call, text, or talk to someone you trust daily. Talk with a volunteer or safety personnel if you cannot connect with a friend or family member.
- Once out of danger and you are safe, wake up and go to bed each day at the same time.



# How Do We Help Others Who Experience Trauma?

You don't need special training to help people who experience trauma because of a natural disaster, but you should be informed. Here are 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 people who experience trauma, recognize that they might be in shock and their survival system is active. People might be angry, crying, or fearful. They might be unable to verbalize their needs. It's important to listen, speak calmly, and keep an open posture.

**Tip No. 2: Prioritize physical 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, or providing them with 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 such as 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. They might feel helpless and be unable to problem solve or follow simple directions. They may also suddenly begin crying or become overwhelmed with emotion. 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 such as, "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.

- **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 figure out which situations they can control.
- **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 the 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.

If you know someone who is experiencing signs of a mental health crisis, you can text, chat, or call 988 which is the Suicide and Crisis lifeline (<https://988lifeline.org/>) to indicate that you are a Kentuckian or call the suicide crisis lifeline.



## Resources and References:

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