



# DISASTER MENTAL HEALTH



Experiencing and then recovering from a major disaster can be highly stressful for everyone impacted. The following disaster mental health tips can help you better prepare for and respond to the emotional aspects of an emergency and be more effective in helping others. Note that these are written for the lay person and that **serious medical problems or psychological issues should only be handled by professionals.**

## ALWAYS SAFETY FIRST

The most important psychological need is to feel safe. Address physical safety first, followed by necessities such as food, water, shelter and relevant information. This will **improve the chances of being able to cope with everything else.**



**STRESS REACTIONS** can cause **physical symptoms** (fatigue, pain, chest tightness) as well as **emotional** (anxiousness, anger, guilt), **cognitive** (difficulty making decisions, thinking clearly, recalling) and **behavioral** (withdrawal, outbursts, shutdown) issues. This is true for everyone, even professional responders. Expect stress reactions in yourself and others and understand that these can occur immediately or at any time after a disaster.

## PREPARE IN ADVANCE

There are steps that you can take to help prepare for the stress and mental health challenges of a disaster, including:



**UNDERSTAND** how you handle stress and what your stress reactions could be. The better you can recognize these reactions, the better you can try to cope and work through them.



**WRITE DOWN** several ways you could de-stress that will still be available to you after a disaster situation.



**THINK AHEAD** about what would be especially upsetting or stressful for you to see, hear, smell, or do? Think about how you could cope (what will you do, say or tell yourself) and imagine successfully coping over and over to reinforce it. Thinking ahead about what might be a problem lets you think through the best course of action beforehand!



**PRACTICE SAYING** things that are realistic and supportive, true and helpful. The words we use and things we say and think have enduring impact.



**PRACTICE BREATHING** low and slow using your belly, not your chest, as this helps counter the chemical effects of stress in the body.

## MORE IN-DEPTH STEPS FOR PREPARING IN ADVANCE



**TAKE TRAINING** such as from CERT, the American Red Cross or your local health care provider. Look for local classes specifically covering disaster mental health and psychological first aid.



**RESPOND** Some steps that you can take during and immediately after a disaster when assisting others to help minimize stress and to address mental health needs include:

- ❖ Stay as calm as you possibly can. Breathe and take a moment to compose yourself first.
- ❖ Don't rush into action immediately. Slow yourself down and think; then act.
- ❖ See the Need. Say the Need. Be empathic, find something to agree on and collaborate.
- ❖ Connect with an individual in need by exchanging names and explaining your role.
- ❖ When assisting another person, get to their level and make eye contact. Have a gentle facial expression. Keep movements purposeful but relaxed, not restless.
- ❖ Listen and hear what someone is saying and how they say it (and notice what is not said). Observe nonverbal cues and behaviors.
- ❖ Be honest and trustworthy and do not judge. Be supportive: "You can do this." "You're safe now."
- ❖ Notice when stress reactions are interfering with your ability to be safe or compassionate, and don't put yourself in any danger or in a position that could aggravate the situation.



**RECOVER: PROTECT & CONNECT** Help yourself and others after a disaster to recover by protecting and connecting as best as you are able:

- ❖ Provide support through your caring actions and show appreciation of the difficulties at hand.
- ❖ Share what is and what is not working and encourage positive coping measures.
- ❖ Reduce exposure to mass media and non-essential information.
- ❖ Realize that in a crisis, children, in particular, watch adult's reactions.
- ❖ Emotional and social isolation is a common response to a disaster. Support community connections and help find ways for people to get involved in their own recovery.
- ❖ When it's all over, find positive lessons to take and learn from your disaster experience.



**GO TO A PRO** You are not expected to provide psychotherapy or to cope with people who have severe mental illness. **Learn where and what services are available and how to refer people in need.** If you or others you are assisting have impulses to hurt yourself or another person, are overusing substances, or stress reactions are harming relationships, lasting longer than a few weeks or are worsening, immediately seek out a mental health professional for help. Know that **post-traumatic stress disorder is a serious condition** and that a specialist may be needed.



**MORE INFORMATION** - There are many sources of additional information for dealing with mental health issues during and after a disaster including:



- **FEMA Listen, Protect, and Connect Guide: PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID FOR CHILDREN AND PARENTS**  
[https://www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/documents/files/PFA\\_Parents.pdf](https://www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/documents/files/PFA_Parents.pdf)
- **FEMA Community Emergency Response Team Training Video: Disaster Psychology (43:18)**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpfdujyk3eA>
- **Listos California First Aid Kit For Your Mind** (multiple languages available)  
[www.listoscalifornia.org/community-projects/mental-health/](http://www.listoscalifornia.org/community-projects/mental-health/)
- **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)** offers a free 6-hour Psychological First Aid Webinar [learn.nctsn.org/enrol/index.php?id=38](http://learn.nctsn.org/enrol/index.php?id=38). Resources are available at: [nctsn.org/resources/](http://nctsn.org/resources/)
- **Mental Health First Aid for Adults or Youth:** [mentalhealthfirstaid.org/take-a-course/](http://mentalhealthfirstaid.org/take-a-course/)
- **Disaster and Behavioral Health Response mobile application by SAMHSA:**  
[store.samhsa.gov/product/samhsa-disaster](http://store.samhsa.gov/product/samhsa-disaster)



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