

## A disaster safety kit

### Stages of Disaster

**1 – Pre-impact** – Knowledge of impending disaster, type, duration and extent.

**2 – Impact** – Surviving the disaster and assessing immediate needs.

**3 – Post impact** – Long term physical survival, emotional impact, needs of others, self protection.

**1 – Pre-impact** – Knowledge of the type of disaster will allow for a certain amount of preparation that could be tailored to the event needs. It would allow people to prepare physically and psychologically for the event. It would allow for the accumulation of information that could help people endure and be of constructive help during and after the event.

Having a basic survival kit as outlined below, listening to broadcasts that provide information outlining the expected scope of the disaster and the expected response of authorities can provide some certainty and reduce the immediate burden on agencies providing relief. **You will then have a purpose, knowledge and the basic tools, this will be your survival ticket.**

### Recommendations

- Form groups that can contact and support each other
- Develop the skills necessary for basic survival, specialize.
- Have a survival kit
- Have options regarding gathering points so groups can meet
- Look at your surroundings now and assess safety for each type of disaster
- Move, if you have the option, to minimize risk and maximize safety.
- Do your first aid. Look at it from a disaster point of view.
- Look at your addictions
- Prepare if you can for seeing death in all forms. Desensitize.
- Look at your clothing now in every day situations
- Wean your self off medications now if you can, your options may be limited later.
- Network with people you can trust
- Have a skill you can barter.
- Be prepared for the loss of loved ones.
- Be informed, radio/TV. Know the extent and duration of the disaster.

## Disaster Safety Kit

Hazards can strike quickly and without warning. Act now to prepare for at least the first 72 hours following a major disaster. The following items should be included in your disaster safety kit. We recommend:

- Basic safety equipment
  - flashlight with spare batteries
  - radio with spare batteries or crank radio
  - emergency candles and water proof matches
  - first aid kit
  - pocket knife
- Food and water supplies
  - three day supply of bottled water (4 litres per person/day)
  - purification tablets
  - three day supply of non-perishable food (per person)
  - manual can opener
  - disposable plates, cutlery, cups
- Ready-to-go bag
  - one change of clothes for each person
  - special items for infants, elderly or disabled
  - extra keys for the car or building and some cash
  - personal medication and prescriptions for medication/eyeglasses
  - whistle
- Personal hygiene kit
  - toothbrush and toothpaste (per person)
  - shampoo and hairbrush
  - sanitary napkins
  - towel and facecloth (per person)
- Other essential items
  - blankets for each person
  - photocopies of personal documents – including insurance policy
  - recent photos of each person
  - activity books and/or playing cards
  - three day supply of food and water for pets

Place these items in a waterproof container. Store your disaster safety kit in a convenient place so it is accessible when disaster strikes. Check your kit every six months to ensure that it meets your changing needs, the water and food supply are fresh, and batteries are in working order. Ask your physician or pharmacist about storing medications.

## **Surviving a Natural Disaster: The Emotional Toll**

Surviving a natural disaster has to do with much more than getting through the environmental, physical, and financial aspects of the disaster. Those aspects are sometimes easier to notice and are oftentimes emphasized more in the news coverage in the media. However, the increased vulnerability that most people experience when they have faced extreme danger, death and physical injury, and the loss of their regular ways of life cannot be ignored. Such feelings of vulnerability almost always lead to immense levels of stress. And the effects—the emotional toll—of that stress can vary from person to person.

It is quite normal for people to experience mild stress reactions for several days or weeks after a natural disaster. Often, initially, people will experience shock and denial in first couple hours or days after the disaster. When shock occurs, people feel stunned or dazed. Denial means that they cannot acknowledge that a stressful situation has occurred or that they cannot experience the full intensity of what has happened. Both shock and denial are normal protective responses to the trauma of the disaster, which can be too much to absorb all at once.

After those initial reactions subside, people's reactions can vary to a large extent. Often they may feel intense and unpredictable feelings, though sometimes feelings of anger and fear may be triggered by specific reminders of the natural disaster. Some people will have reactions immediately following the event and some will have delayed reactions. Some will recover quickly and some will have adverse effects for a long time. It is important to remember that there is no standard pattern of reaction to natural disasters and other trauma. Specifically, the varied reactions may include any of the following:

*Emotional reactions:* Experiencing feelings of fear, grief, anger, guilt, resentment, helplessness, hopelessness, or ongoing emotional numbness

*Cognitive reactions:* Being confused, disoriented, indecisive, worried. Noticing decreased attention span and concentration, memory problems, unwanted memories. Having negative thoughts about oneself, perhaps in a blaming way.

*Physical reactions:* Feeling tension, fatigue, restlessness. Having sleep disturbances, bodily aches and pains, changes in appetite. Experiencing racing heartbeat, nausea, quick startle response.

*Interpersonal reactions:* Feeling more distrustful, irritable. Having more conflict in relationships. Withdrawing/isolating from others and putting distance between oneself and others. Feeling rejected and abandoned by others. Being judgmental and over-controlling.

Though most people's reactions will dissipate within a few weeks, as many as one in three survivors of natural disasters will experience more severe stress responses. Those responses can last for multiple weeks, months, or even years. Those who are more at greater risk for experiencing the more severe reactions

are those who experienced or witnessed during or after the natural disaster the following things:

- Loss of loved ones
- Life-threatening danger
- Exposure to others' deaths/injury/maiming
- Extreme environmental destruction or human violence
- Loss of home, possessions, neighborhood, community
- Loss of communication with and support from loved ones
- Extreme fatigue, sleep deprivation, hunger, or weather exposure
- Extreme emotional and/or physical strain
- Exposure to toxic contamination

Other factors that may tend to increase the risk of a prolonged stress reaction include:

- Having a history of previous trauma
- Having chronic medical or psychological conditions
- Experiencing high life stressors/emotional strain prior to the event or in addition to the disaster after it occurs
- Experiencing chronic poverty, unemployment, homelessness, or discrimination prior to the disaster
- Facing higher levels of intensity of the disaster
- Having an overall high level of difficulty coping with challenging life situations prior to the disaster

The more severe stress responses that can occur may include the emotional, cognitive, physical, and interpersonal reactions listed above, which can be experienced in greater quantity, at greater intensity, and for a longer period of time than with the normal stress response. The severe stress responses may also include:

- Dissociation—where a person feels detached from their thoughts, feelings, and body—as though they are in a dream. May also include memory blanks where a person cannot remember what had happened during a certain period of time
- Intrusive re-experiencing of the natural disaster—can come back through unwanted memories, nightmares, flashbacks
- Extreme avoidance of disturbing memories—such as through chemical abuse or self-injury
- Hyper-arousal—the person feels anxious all of the time, is easily enraged, is highly irritable or on edge, feels agitated, and seems to be “on alert” at all times
- Severe anxiety or depression

It is possible for people who have experienced a natural disaster to decrease the risk of these ongoing, negative stress reactions and to increase their ability to recovery. Reducing the risk of these reactions can be accomplished through a variety of means. These may include:

- Seeing to basic needs—shelter, safety, food/water, sanitation, privacy, rest
- Identifying key resources to recovery—FEMA, Red Cross, Salvation Army,

Local Emergency Assistance groups, church, personal resources (external and internal)

- Establishing priorities for self and family. Breaking problems into smaller, more manageable steps and focusing on one step at a time
- Re-establishing routine/structure to days to enhance sense of control. Avoiding workaholicism as a way to escape the reaction to the disaster
- Maintaining and re-establishing communication with loved ones and talking about experiences—releasing stress through getting support. Avoiding isolation/withdrawal from others. Talking to others who have gone through the same situation
- Increasing self-care—sleep, nutrition, exercise, avoiding or limiting substance use (including tobacco and caffeine)
- Educating yourself about trauma reactions—helps to normalize what you are going through and point to ways to cope and seek help
- Finding ways to calm self through relaxation—soothing music, deep breathing, visualization, meditation, prayer
- Practicing positive distraction to focus your thoughts on more productive things—hobbies, recreation, work, art, etc.
- Considering medication to help with sleep problems, extreme anxiety, or long-lasting low moods
- Volunteering—doing something for others outside of the situation of, if compelled, for those who have gone through the same situation
- Making meaning of what you experienced—what you have learned about your values, strengths, and what is most important to you (which may not be possible to evaluate until months after the disaster). Often done through personal reflection or realized with sudden revelation. May also get other points of view by talking with trusted friends or family
- Knowing when to seek professional counseling help—when you cannot and should not do it alone. Counseling may be needed if the reactions you are having cause you distress or lead to problems in your relationships or at work; if you are self-medicating your distress with alcohol and/or drugs; if you do not experience relief over time by using the coping skills listed above; and/or if your reactions worsen over time instead of improve

For those with children who experienced the disaster, it is important to remember that children also experience stress reactions to natural disasters, though they may look differently from the reactions of adults. Things that may be helpful to do to comfort children and to encourage their recovery from the disaster include:

- Increasing the time you spend with them during the months after the trauma.
- Reassuring them with the comfort of physical affection—hugs, pats on the back, holding their hands
- Knowing that it is normal for them to be more dependent and clingy for awhile after a disaster and not punishing them for their temporary increase in neediness
- Letting young children relieve tension and express their concerns through

playing, drawing, and other non-verbal means

- Talking directly to older children about their thoughts/feelings about the disaster
- Establishing schedules and routines to restore a sense of normalcy
- Decreasing children's exposure to news reports of the event, which can be re-traumatizing
- Getting professional help if you notice your children having continued aggressive or emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the event, continued extreme withdrawal, and/or intense anxiety or other emotional difficulties.

Though the experience of going through a natural disaster is difficult enough, it is sometimes surprising to people how much the emotional toll can linger and continue to effect them after the disaster is over. It is crucial to remember that these effects are normal. They are the body, mind, and spirit's way of understanding, accepting, and making peace with an unexplainable situation. Thus, there truly is no one right or wrong way for people to react to such a situation. Through gentle self-care and by coping head-on with the emotional effects of the disaster, those reactions will decrease over time, the disaster can be let go of, and life will begin to re-balance.