

When disaster strikes, coping techniques help those at ground zero

by Laurel Hughes, Psy. D.

Disasters such as Oregon's recent flooding and windstorms often take an emotional toll on those in the middle of things -- but there are a number of coping strategies that can help ease the situation.

Watching your home become inundated, evacuating to a shelter and returning only to discover that your house and community have been heavily damaged -- these increase your stress level. When you add in speculation about the recovery work to come before life returns to normal, it can signal emotional overload.

During a disaster, most people cope satisfactorily with situations that arise. However, during the days following the storm or flooding, many people enter a state of disbelief. What happened to them does not seem real. As time goes on, they may face a wide range of reactions such as anger, sadness, anxiety, confusion, feeling overwhelmed, forgetfulness, withdrawal, grief reactions, intrusive thoughts, difficulty sleeping, physical symptoms and others. All of them are common and may be expected.

Psychological resilience

Thanks to the psychological resilience people build during their lifetime, everyone has a unique set of coping strategies for getting through difficult times such as the aftermath of a disaster. Successful coping will vary from person to person based on what helps them heal and focus on their recovery needs. Many will learn new skills, and become more resilient as a result of their disaster experiences.

Prevention works

Staying connected to your usual social support network and using other prevention techniques after a disaster may help reduce psychological reactions. Social support networks include family, friends, coworkers, schools, houses of worship and other community groups. For those temporarily separated from their networks, newfound disaster survivor colleagues can also provide mutual social support. Both receiving and providing support can be strengthening.

Other steps for successful coping following disaster include:

- Acknowledging symptoms and recognizing that they are normal.

- Stopping to consider, then applying past successful ways of coping.

- Developing a recovery plan and other positive goal-directed activity, and proceeding forward in reasonably sized steps.

- Finding ways to get back into a daily routine.

- Eating regularly and getting enough sleep and exercise.

- Remembering to take regular medications.

- Scheduling breaks from disaster recovery efforts and making time to pursue activities enjoyed before the disaster.

- Maintaining a positive attitude and good self-esteem, focusing on successes rather than dwelling on what has been unsuccessful.

- Avoiding poor coping strategies, such as social isolation, alcohol and recreational drugs, taking frustrations out on others, and becoming a “workaholic.”

Care for serious symptoms

After a disaster, some people will experience more serious symptoms and benefit by consulting with behavioral health professionals. Signs of concern could be crying uncontrollably for days, disorientation, becoming seriously withdrawn, neglecting basic self-care, using alcohol or drugs to excess, thoughts of harming yourself or others, or simply being dissatisfied with current coping abilities.

People on medication to control mental health conditions are advised to contact their medical providers to determine if adjustments are needed based on how they are being affected by the disaster and its aftermath.

Contact your county mental health care provider for assistance.

Note: Hughes, an Oregon licensed psychologist, graduated from Pacific University School of Professional Psychology, held a private practice in Beaverton and was a teacher at the University of Portland. She contracted with the Oregon Department of Human Services to complete the Oregon behavioral health plan and help counties establish their local response plans. She is a mental health volunteer with the American Red Cross and has participated in some 50 disaster relief efforts since 1993. She was primary author of the Red Crossâ€™™ Foundations of Disaster Mental Health course and has written psychology textbooks.

When disaster strikes, coping techniques help those at ground zero by Laurel Hughes, Psy. D.