

Helping an Older Relative Cope After a Natural Disaster

Overview

Ways to help your older relative cope after a natural disaster.

If you have an older relative who has been affected by a natural disaster -- such as a hurricane, flood, or earthquake -- the following suggestions may be useful to you and your family.

- *If your relative is stressed and anxious, encourage him to try to relax and not worry about everything at once.* Help your relative realize that small daily tasks -- getting water or groceries or arranging for rubbish removal -- are major accomplishments. Limit expectations about what can be done each day until the stress begins to diminish.
- *Your relative may experience depression as a result of the disaster and may need some help talking about and working through these feelings.* Make yourself available -- by phone or by visiting -- when she needs to talk. Encourage your relative to participate in social activities that offer opportunities to talk with neighbors and others in the community.
- *Urge your relative to avoid relying on alcohol or medication in response to anxiety or sleeplessness.* Instead, help him seek comfort from friends, family members (including yourself), colleagues, or clergy. Seek professional help if necessary.
- *If a new or temporary living arrangement is needed, take the time to understand your options and involve your older relative in the decision.*
- *If your relative plans to move into your home, think carefully about issues like space, privacy, the availability of medical or social services, and whether your family will get along well.*
- *A traumatic event such as an earthquake, a hurricane, or another natural disaster may bring up memories of other traumas and thus stir up strong feelings from the past.* Your relative may be reacting to not only this event but to a tragedy that happened long ago.
- *Be aware that your relative may not show a reaction to the disaster for weeks or months.* Stay alert for issues that may come up in the future that could be a delayed reaction.
- *For all of us, the feeling of helplessness may be the most painful of all.* Being active in cleaning up, caring for others, or participating in rebuilding the community can give your older relative a sense of control and hope.
- *If your older relative is experiencing any of the following symptoms for a prolonged period of time, seek professional help:*
 - flashbacks and disturbing memories about what has happened

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- feelings of numbness or detachment
- bad dreams or difficulty sleeping
- feelings of sadness or grief
- feelings of anxiety, fear, guilt, or powerlessness
- feelings of anger and irritability
- tiredness
- changes in appetite
- difficulty concentrating

Contact your employee assistance program or employee resource program for help finding information and resources in your community.

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