

PROBLEM SOLUTION FIT OF NATURAL DISASTER

If you have experienced a natural disaster (such as a tornado or hurricane), it is very important to learn ways of coping with the impact these events can have.

Natural disasters have the potential to produce high levels of stress, anxiety, and anger in those who are affected. They are considered to be traumatic events and can potentially trigger post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in survivors.

Unlike other traumatic events, natural disasters can result in tremendous destruction of property and financial loss, which further contributes to stress levels and disrupts coping efforts.¹

For example, a tornado or hurricane can destroy and disperse an entire community, thwarting their attempts to connect with social support.

Ways to Cope With Natural Disasters

Though the effects of natural disasters can be severe and far-reaching, there are steps you can take to cope. Here are some ways you may be able to reduce the trauma of a natural disaster.

- **Seek out and connect with** . Research has consistently found that early intervention, resources, and support from others can be a major factor in helping people overcome the negative effects of a traumatic event.² Given that a natural disaster can impact an entire community, your support system may be weakened by a natural disaster. However, even connecting with one person can make a difference.
- **Identify local support groups or available crisis counselors to talk to.** After a natural disaster, crisis counselors may be brought in to offer support and help you come up with ways of coping with the impact of a natural disaster. Take advantage of these opportunities.
- **Try to establish a schedule.** For example, set regular times for meals, waking up in the morning, or talking with family and friends. A natural disaster can greatly disrupt your regular schedule increasing the extent to which your life feels chaotic and out of control. Coming up with a daily, structured schedule can help you establish a sense of predictability and control.³
- **Talk about the effect of the natural disaster.** Share your feelings with others, or at the very least, find some way to express your emotions. A natural disaster can result in strong feelings of anger, anxiety, and sadness. These emotions need to be expressed. If you i, they may get more intense.

- **Focus on self-care.** A natural disaster can deplete you physically as well as emotionally. It is very important that you make time to care for yourself. Self-care is integral to emotional and physical health. Caring for your body, mind, and spirit can increase your ability to cope with trauma. Make sure you eat well, get enough sleep, and exercise. Mindfulness practice has also been shown to help survivors cope with PTSD.⁴
- **Practice healthy coping strategies.** Following a natural disaster, you will experience a number of intense negative emotions. Therefore, it is very important to identify . Alcohol or substance use, excessive sleep, and seeking comfort in food can be effective short-term strategies for managing emotional distress, but in the long-term, these behaviors don't address the root issue and often increase distress.⁵
- **Try to limit other sources of stress in your life.** Although you may have little control over other sources of stress in your life, try to limit the extent to which you make major decisions or life changes. Your most important task following a natural disaster is getting your life and emotions back in order. Therefore, it is important to put yourself in a place where it is going to be easier to do this.
- **Find ways to help others.** Helping others can provide you with a sense of agency, purpose, control, and empowerment.⁶

Symptoms of PTSD

It is important to recognize that it is very normal to experience PTSD-like symptoms in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

You may experience intrusive thoughts or memories of the traumatic event, feel on edge, or have difficulty sleeping.⁷ These symptoms are, in many ways, the body's natural reaction to being exposed to (and surviving) a highly stressful event.

Healthy Coping Strategies

Symptoms naturally dissipate over time for most people who experience a traumatic event such as a natural disaster. Coping in a healthy manner further increases the likelihood that these symptoms will improve.⁸

However, engaging in unhealthy coping strategies (for example, drinking alcohol or other methods of avoidance) can increase the possibility that these symptoms will linger and potentially get worse—eventually resulting in a

Healthy coping strategies are key to recovering from a natural disaster.

Getting Help

If you notice that your symptoms are not getting better and are with aspects of your day-to-day life, it may be time to get help.

If you decide to start therapy, finding a qualified mental health provider can be an overwhelming and stressful task. Fortunately, there are websites with free search tools that can help you find in your area who are trained to treat PTSD.

Even if you don't feel as though your symptoms are interfering with your life, it can still be beneficial to talk with someone. A qualified and compassionate mental health professional can offer support and resources while you work through the stress of the aftermath of a natural disaster.⁹

A therapist can also help you develop problem-solving skills to help you get your life back in order after the event, which takes some of the strain off you. The additional support and tools may prevent the development of PTSD or another trauma-related condition.