

# Helping Families Deal with Stress Related to Disasters



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# A disaster is an event that:

- **Involves the destruction of property, injury, and/or loss of life**
- **Has an identifiable beginning and end**
- **Adversely affects a relatively large group of people**
- **Is “public” and shared by members of more than one family**
- **Is out of the realm of ordinary experience**
- **Is psychologically traumatic enough to induce distress in almost anyone, regardless of previous condition or experience**

# Disasters are:

- **Fires, Drought**
- **Hurricanes, Tornados**
- **Earthquakes, Floods**
- **Vehicle Accidents**
- **War and Terrorist Attacks**

# Family Situation

**Ben and Sue's home was destroyed by a wildfire. They have 3 children, aged 16, 10 and 4. Ben and Sue are arguing about where to live. Ben gets a stomach ache every time he gets ready for work and Sue's head aches every time she smells smoke. The youngest child is having nightmares and the other 2 children are angry because they must change schools.**

# What happens to families after a disaster?

- **Long term consequences**
- **Changes in family system**
- **Communication breakdown**
- **Traumatic stress symptoms**

# Disasters have long-term consequences for families.

- **Normal routines change**
- **Lose income, home, family farm**
- **Need new employment**
- **Move to a different city**
- **Nonworking parent returns to work**
- **Children sent to live with relatives**

# Disasters change the family system.

- **Parental disorganization**
- **Increased alcohol or drug use by a family member**
- **Increased conflict or violent behavior between family members**
- **Relocation including school changes**
- **Decreased physical and emotional availability of parents**
- **Loss of children's friends and chance to participate in normal activities**

# Communication under stress is overwhelming.

- **Unable to understand feelings**
- **Hard to solve problems**
- **Poor listeners/ poor concentration**
- **Silence/ afraid to say wrong thing**



# Traumatic stress is experienced from disasters.

## Some of the symptoms

- **Intense mood swings, anxiety, depression**
- **Flashbacks, vivid memory of event, inability to concentrate**
- **Rapid heartbeat; sweating; headache, nausea, general pain, digestive problems**
- **Frequent arguments with family members and/or coworkers**
- **Withdrawal and isolation**

# What happens to children after a disaster?

- **Increased dependency on parents**
- **Nightmares**
- **Regression in development**
- **Specific fears about reminders of the disasters**
- **Demonstration of the disaster through play**

# Reactions vary for the age of child.

- **Preschooler-clinging, startle response**
- **Middle school-strongest effect, hostile, apathetic**
- **Teen-rebellion, confusion**

**Understanding the Impact of Disasters on the Lives of  
Children and Youth**

[http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting\\_families/03youth.html](http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting_families/03youth.html)

# What can adults do to help themselves?

- **Communication techniques**
- **Coping with stress skills**

# Communication techniques



- **Have family meetings**
- **Accept everyone's opinion/ feelings**
- **Check to see if understood**
- **Learn stress signals- look away, face red**

# Coping with stress skills

- **Depends on personality and how problem solve**
- **What works for one may not work for another**

**Promoting the Health and Well Being of Families  
during Difficult Times: Supporting Families  
Following a Disaster**

[http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting\\_families/index.html](http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting_families/index.html)

# Problem focused coping skills



- **Use community resources for stress management**
- **Tell family about your stress**
- **Develop family plan to address stressor**
- **Time and money management**
- **Seek professional help**

# Environment focused coping skills

- **Make home a safe place**
- **Create a routine**
- **Accept help from others and talk to a friend**
- **Reduce stress in workplace**
- **Seek to have control over environment**



# Emotion focused coping skills



- **Have a quiet time for yourself daily**
- **Keep a sense of humor**
- **Participate in spiritual activities**
- **Join a support group (lunch with friends)**
- **Exercise to manage stress and keep self-esteem**

# Self-directed coping skills



- **Do things that help you relax-walk, read**
- **Get enough sleep, exercise**
- **Drink water, eat healthy foods**
- **Avoid alcohol, caffeine, sugar**
- **Meditate, get a massage**

# How can children learn to cope?

- **Parents and teachers help children cope.**

- **Lots of activities and resources available:**

**Children, Stress, and Natural Disasters**

<http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/disaster/teacher/teacher.html>

# Activity for young children to discuss feelings:

## **Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst**

- **Read book and ask questions**
- **Why was Alexander's day so bad?**
- **Have you ever had a bad day?**
- **How did you feel that day?**
- **Alexander wanted to move to Australia.**
- **Have you ever wanted to move away?**

# What can you do to help families after disasters?



- **Listening and finding resources**
- **When you're in over your head**
- **How to refer**
- **Signs of suicide**

# Listening and finding resources

- **Sit and just listen**
- **Provide access to resources such as help with finances, building supplies**
- **Helping Families in Distress**  
<http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/disaster/facts/famdist.html>

# When you're in over your head

- **When you feel uncomfortable**
- **When person says, “nothing is helping”**
- **When person is so emotional, can't talk**
- **Threatens harm to self/ others**
- **Changes in speech, memory confusion, seeing things**

# How to refer a person for help

- **Be aware of helping agencies in your community**
- **Listen for signs that person needs help that you can't give**
- **Decide what agency would be of most help**
- **Discuss referral with person or family members**
- **If person won't make contact, take action by calling referral**
- **Ask referral agency how to get person in need in to see them**
- **Make sure person and referral get together**



# Some signs of suicidal intent

- **Severe, intense feelings of anxiety or depression**
- **Withdrawn, alone, lack of friends and supports**
- **Sense of complete powerlessness, a hopeless feeling**
- **Alcohol abuse- often a link between alcoholism and suicide**
- **Previous suicidal attempts**
- **Suicidal plan**
- **Cries for help: Making a will, giving possessions away, making statements such as "I'm calling it quits," or "Maybe my family would be better off without me."**

# Signs when a farm family may need help

- **Signs of Farm and Ranch Stress**

<http://www.ext.colostate.edu/drought/checklist.html>

# Family Situation

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# Apply concepts to family situation

- Experienced loss of home and contents had to move, lost money
- Going through grief of loss, anxiety of happening again
- Traumatic stress physical symptoms
- Marriage problems

# Self-help techniques

- **Deal with problems- money management help**
- **Reduce anxiety- support group, relaxation tape**
- **Communication- family meeting**
- **Marriage issues- learn stress signals**
- **Children- talk about feelings**

# Family may need outside help

- **May not appear, but look for signs of suicide**
- **May need referral for professional help for anxiety and marriage issues**

# Resources

- **Helping Families in Distress from University of Illinois Extension**  
<http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/disaster/facts/famdist.html>
- **Children, Stress, and Natural Disasters from University of Illinois Extension** <http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/disaster/teacher/teacher.html>
- **Promoting the Health and Well Being of Families during Difficult Times: Supporting Families Following a Disaster from University of Arizona Extension**  
[http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting\\_families/index.html](http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting_families/index.html)
- **Signs of Farm and Ranch Stress from Colorado State University Extension** <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/drought/checklist.html>