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
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
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
  [Link](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
  [Link](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
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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

• Signs of Farm and Ranch Stress from Colorado State University Extension
  http://www.ext.colostate.edu/drought/checklist.html