

# Coping with Stress after a Tornado

Following a natural disaster, such as a tornado, people in the affected areas are likely to experience emotional distress, especially

- ▶ those living in the impacted area.
- ▶ families and loved ones of victims.
- ▶ first responders.
- ▶ people who are often turned to in times of emergency (religious leaders, mayors, city and community leaders, etc.).

That said, even those who live a distance away but observe events on television or the internet can be affected, especially if they have experienced weather-related trauma before.

## Common Signs of Distress Following a Disaster

- ▶ Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- ▶ Nightmares, especially about the event
- ▶ Anxiety or lots of worry
- ▶ Sadness or frequent crying
- ▶ Anger or irritation
- ▶ Guilt, even when the event was outside of your control
- ▶ Disconnection, or feeling as though you don't care about anyone or anything
- ▶ Feeling numb
- ▶ Stomachache or gastrointestinal distress
- ▶ Headaches
- ▶ Sweating or chills
- ▶ Feeling jumpy or being startled easily
- ▶ Trouble relaxing or feeling on edge

- ▶ A lack of energy or feeling tired all the time
- ▶ Lack of appetite or an increase in appetite
- ▶ Withdrawing or isolating from others
- ▶ Feeling as though you are alone in your reactions
- ▶ Trouble remembering things or difficulty focusing
- ▶ Difficulty talking about the disaster or hearing other people talk about it
- ▶ Increase in substance use to cope with distressing feelings

## How to Help Yourself and Those Around You

- ▶ **Make sure basic needs like food and water are taken care of first.** Ensuring your body is taken care of will help reduce stress's negative impacts.
- ▶ **Avoid using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs to cope with distress.** These substances can make things more difficult in the long run and create additional problems.
- ▶ **Give yourself time to adjust.** This will likely be a difficult and stressful time. Allow yourself time to grieve or mourn losses or changes. Try to be patient with yourself and your emotional responses.
- ▶ **Remind yourself that there will be good and bad days.** It is normal to experience a variety of emotions following a disaster. Given the level of uncertainty following a disaster, it is common for some days to be more emotionally taxing than others.
- ▶ **Reach out for support from loved ones and those who will listen.** These can be family, friends, religious leaders, or other people in your community. Be mindful that the people immediately around you have experienced the same trauma. Providing support to each other can help the healing process.

- ▶ **Communicate what you experienced.** If you feel comfortable, talk with family or loved ones. If not, write out your experiences or speak them aloud by yourself. Bottling up the thoughts and feelings about the experience can make healing more difficult.
- ▶ **Try to establish a routine.** These can be things like waking up at the same time, eating meals at the same time, or exercising. This is particularly important when your normal routines have been disrupted. Even if you cannot return to your home or are in a shelter, establishing even small routines can bring a sense of normalcy and comfort.
- ▶ **Set priorities.** Try to break big tasks into more manageable chunks and prioritize tasks that must be done first.
- ▶ **Find healthy ways to relax.** These can be deep breathing exercises, listening to music, connecting with loved ones, attending religious services, or whatever brings you peace. It is common to feel pressure to constantly be doing something productive after a disaster. However, even just a few minutes of relaxation can go a long way to reducing the feelings of stress and its negative impacts on your body.
- ▶ **Use healthy coping skills that have worked previously.** If you have experienced past stressful events, such as the death of a loved one or loss of a job, try to remember what sorts of things helped then. Try to use those coping skills now.
- ▶ **Limit exposure to TV and social media content regarding the disaster.** Taking in too much information often increases distress. Focus on the information you need to know, such as where to get assistance, and avoid speculation and rumors.
- ▶ **Help others in your community.** As you are able, reach out to neighbors and those in your community to check on them. This is especially helpful for older people or those who don't have a lot of family or supports locally. Offering help to others, even when you are distressed, can help you feel more in control, foster a sense of community, and help you feel better. Consider helping your neighbors with cleanup, volunteering, donating blood, or donating to a charity.
- ▶ **Avoid major life decisions if possible.** While some of it may be unavoidable, you want to limit how much additional stress you are experiencing. Avoid switching careers or jobs or making other significant decisions if you can.

## When to Ask for Help

Some people may be able to cope with the stress of a natural disaster by using the above tips. However, it is not uncommon for people to have symptoms that continue impacting their daily lives. If you notice that you are continuing to experience the symptoms of stress, especially after life has started to return to some normalcy, or if it starts to interfere with things like work or relationships, it is important to reach out for help. It is especially important to get help if you experience suicidal thoughts.

Some signs to watch out for in yourself and those around you:

- ▶ Crying spells
- ▶ Angry outbursts
- ▶ Difficulty eating
- ▶ Trouble sleeping
- ▶ Loss of interest in things once enjoyed
- ▶ Physical symptoms such as stomach complaints or headaches
- ▶ Fatigue or excessive tiredness
- ▶ Feelings of guilt, hopelessness, or helplessness
- ▶ Withdrawing from loved ones
- ▶ Suicidal thoughts

If you notice these symptoms occurring for more than 2 weeks after the disaster, this is a sign that you or your loved one would likely benefit from talking to a mental health professional.

Trained mental health professionals can help work with individuals impacted by a traumatic event to find ways to process the event and cope with its impact. See the Resources page for national and local resources for finding a mental health provider.

## References

American Psychiatric Association. (2019). *Coping After Disaster*.

<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/coping-after-disaster-trauma>

American Psychological Association. (2020). *Managing traumatic stress: After a tornado*.

<https://www.apa.org/topics/disasters-response/tornadoes>

American Red Cross. (2009). *Taking care of your emotional health after a disaster*.

[https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/PDFs/Be\\_Red\\_Cross\\_Ready/EmotionalHealth.pdf](https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/PDFs/Be_Red_Cross_Ready/EmotionalHealth.pdf)

SAMHSA. (2011). Disaster Distress Helpline brochure.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/disaster-response-template-toolkit/printed-materials#brochures>

SAMHSA. (2022). Survivors of Disasters Resource Portal.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/disaster-survivors>

SAMHSA. (2013). *Tips for Survivors of a Disaster or Other Traumatic Event: Managing Stress*.

<https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma13-4776.pdf>

## Resources

### ***Disaster Distress Helpline***

1-800-985-5990

### ***SAMHSA's National Helpline***

1-800-662-HELP

### ***National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline***

Call or text 988

Chat online at <https://988lifeline.org/chat>

### ***Crisis Text Line***

Text "HOME" to 741741

### ***Strength After***

<https://strengthafterdisaster.org>

### ***Disaster Distress Helpline Online Peer Support Communities***

<https://strengthafterdisaster.org/peer-support>

### ***National Alliance on Mental Illness HelpLine***

(Mon. to Fri. 10 a.m.–10 p.m. ET)

1-800-950-NAMI

Text "HelpLine" to 62640

### ***Find treatment in your area for mental health and substance use:***

<https://findtreatment.gov/>

---

**Publication 3890** (POD-04-23)

By Ashley R. Pate, Research Associate, Psychology; Nathan Barclay, Graduate Student, Applied Psychology; Deepali M. Dhruve, Research Associate, Psychology; Michael R. Nadorff, PhD, Associate Professor and Director, Psychology; and **David R. Buys**, PhD, Associate Professor and Extension State Health Specialist, Food Science, Nutrition, and Health Promotion.

*Copyright 2023 by Mississippi State University. All rights reserved. This publication may be copied and distributed without alteration for nonprofit educational purposes provided that credit is given to the Mississippi State University Extension Service.*

Produced by Agricultural Communications.

Mississippi State University is an equal opportunity institution. Discrimination in university employment, programs, or activities based on race, color, ethnicity, sex, pregnancy, religion, national origin, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, genetic information, status as a U.S. veteran, or any other status protected by applicable law is prohibited.

Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. STEVE MARTIN, Interim Director