

# When disaster strikes, coping techniques help those at ground zero

Disasters such as Oregon's recent flooding and windstorms often take an emotional toll on those in the middle of things — but there are a number of coping strategies that can help ease the situation.

Watching your home become inundated, evacuating to a shelter and returning only to discover that your house and community have been heavily damaged — these increase your stress level. When you add in speculation about the recovery work to come before life returns to normal, it can signal emotional overload.

During a disaster, most people cope satisfactorily with situations that arise. However, during the days following the storm or flooding, many people enter a state of disbelief. What happened to them does not seem real. As time goes on, they may face a wide range of reactions such as anger, sadness, anxiety, confusion, feeling over-

whelmed, forgetfulness, withdrawal, grief reactions, intrusive thoughts, difficulty sleeping, physical symptoms and others. All of them are common and may be expected.

Psychological resilience. Thanks to the psychological resilience people build during their lifetime, everyone has a unique set of coping strategies for getting through difficult times such as the aftermath of a disaster. Successful coping will vary from person to person based on what helps them heal and focus on their recovery needs. Many will learn new skills, and become more resilient as a result of their disaster experience.

Prevention works. Staying connected to your usual social support network and using other prevention techniques after a disaster may help reduce psychological reactions. Social support networks include family, friends, coworkers, schools,

houses of worship and other community groups. For those temporarily separated from their networks, newfound disaster survivor colleagues can also provide mutual social support. Both receiving and providing support can be strengthening.

Other steps for successful coping following disaster include:

- Acknowledging symptoms and recognizing that they are normal.
- Stopping to consider, then applying past successful ways of coping.
- Developing a recovery plan and other positive goal-directed activity, and proceeding forward in reasonably sized steps.
- Finding ways to get back into a daily routine.
- Eating regularly and getting enough sleep and exercise.
- Remembering to take regular medications.
- Scheduling breaks from

disaster recover efforts and making time to pursue activities enjoyed before the disaster.

• Maintaining a positive attitude and good self-esteem, focusing on successes rather than dwelling on what has been successful.

• Avoiding poor coping strategies, such as social isolation, alcohol and recreational drugs, taking frustrations out on others and becoming a "workaholic."

Care for serious symptoms. After a disaster, some people will experience more serious symptoms and benefit by consulting with behavioral health professionals. Signs of concern could be crying uncontrollably for days, disorientation, becoming seriously withdrawn, neglecting basic self-care, using alcohol or drugs to excess, thoughts of harming yourself or others, or simply being dissatisfied with current coping abilities.

People on medication to control mental health conditions are advised to contact their medical providers to determine if adjustments are needed based on how they are being affected by the disaster and its aftermath.

Contact your county mental health care provider for assistance. In Vernonia, crisis counseling is available at Cedar Ridge from the Red Cross and from Columbia Community Mental Health at the medical tent at Providence Medical Clinic.

Written by Laurel Hughes, Psy. D., an Oregon licensed psychologist and is a mental health volunteer with the American Red Cross. She has participated in some 50 disaster relief efforts since 1993 and is the primary author of the Red Cross' Foundations of Disaster Mental Health course and has written psychology textbooks.

## Well-owners advised to take safety precautions after recent storms

The Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) Public Health Division is reminding flood-affected Oregonians who depend on private well water to take precautions to avoid water-borne infections and ensure the safety of food.

Flooding can temporarily contaminate well water with coliform bacteria. Bacteria from flood waters could enter the well. Before using well water it is important to disinfect and

flush the entire system and then sample for coliform. You can find detailed procedures on how to disinfect a well at the DHS Drinking Water Program's Web site.

People who do not have access to the Web can call 971-673-0405 during normal business hours, Monday through Friday, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. for technical advice on how to disinfect their well.

For more information on well

water, other drinking water, and food safety, go to one of these sites: <http://oregon.gov/DHS/ph>

[/dwp/tools.shtml](http://dwp/tools.shtml), or <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disaster/foodwater>, or <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fac>

[t\\_Sheets/keeping\\_food\\_Safe\\_during\\_an\\_emergency/index.asp](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Facility_Sheets/keeping_food_Safe_during_an_emergency/index.asp)

## Protective clean-up guidelines offered

The Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) issued protective guidelines, last week, for home and business owners who are doing clean-up work on their properties after the recent storm.

Always wear waterproof gloves and footwear, long-sleeved shirts, full-length pants and protective eyewear when doing flood clean-up.

Always wash hands with

soap and water after flood clean-up or handling potentially contaminated articles. It is also important to clean protective gear after use.

Standing water, wet building materials and furnishings are excellent environments for micro-organisms such as bacteria, fungi and mold, says Rick Leiker, toxicology program manager in the DHS Public Health Division.

"If not removed, these organisms can cause allergic reactions, diseases and asthmatic attacks to people after they move back into their homes and businesses," Leiker says.

To ensure a healthy indoor environment, Leiker advises:

- Remove all standing water from the building.
- Dry the building out as quickly as possible to prevent growth of mold and mildew.
- Remove all wet materials.

If articles have been soaked and cannot be dried rapidly and thoroughly, dispose of them. This includes larger absorbent materials and furniture such as sofas, mattresses, carpets, carpet pads, as well as wallboard and all insulation materials.

- Take up and remove carpets. Clean disinfect and thor-

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