

# Disaster Preparedness: Being Emotionally Prepared

Hurricanes Katrina, Andrew and Sandy; terrorist attacks of 9/11; school shootings in Columbine and Sandy Hook. We recall of these disasters and the devastating impact each caused at the mention of their name. We cannot escape disasters. Over the past 30 years, a disaster has occurred somewhere in the world at an average rate of once every 36 hours (source: David Gillespie, Washington University). Chances are you have been impacted by a disaster for which you may or may not have been prepared.

There are many types of disasters, but they are classified in two ways: natural and man-made. Natural disasters include hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes and floods and their impact can be overwhelming. Loss of life, destruction of property and loss of everyday needs such as water, electricity, food and fuel are often common with a natural disaster. Man-made disasters, such as 9/11 and the shootings in Aurora and Sandy Hook, can have the same destructive impact but often include anger and disbelief.

When it comes to disasters, being prepared is very important to how you respond and recover. Your facility should practice disaster response drills, and at home you may have a disaster kit that includes food, water and medicines. Preparing for a disaster can reduce the fear, anxiety and losses that disasters cause. But how do you prepare emotionally to take care of yourself and others who you lead?

What we do to prepare for the emotional needs of a disaster can be just as important as the physical preparation we do. While one can never fully prepare for the emotional response during a crisis, recognizing the signs and symptoms of reactions before, during and after a disaster are sometimes as important as the physical needs. It is important to be able to recognize and detect the signs of stress and/or shock during a disaster so that you can address immediately. Here are several warning signs that one may experience:

- Physical signs: fatigue, upset stomach, shakiness, dizziness, heart palpitations, clamminess, disorientation, difficulty thinking, memory loss, loss of appetite
- Emotional signs: anxiety, grief, depression, irritability, feeling overwhelmed, thinking you or your loved ones will be harmed, nightmares, extreme fear
- Mental/cognitive signs: racing thoughts, confusion, lack of concentration, preoccupation with the event
- Behavioral signs: pacing, crying, neglecting basic needs, blaming (self or others)

When you, your family, your workplace or your community experience a disaster, you will be placed in the role of a leader. By nature of your position, you lead and that natural instinct will be looked upon as the crisis unfolds. As it has often been said, anyone can lead when times are good, but you become defined as a leader when you go through a crisis. Leadership during a crisis will require you to be: emotionally prepared to recognize your own needs and reactions and how to take care of those needs; strong and committed to your family's needs, both physical and emotional; a leader in your community with the many roles you may play in church, school or other volunteer efforts; and lastly, a prepared leader in the workplace.

When disasters strike, we all have an immediate emotional reaction. Often this is expressed in anger, disbelief, numbness or sadness. For everyone that is exposed to a disaster, research has shed light on many facets of our response. Here are some things that we know about experiencing a disaster:

- Everyone has a story to tell, where you were, how you felt. For many there is strong need to share this story with others.
- No one who experiences a disaster is untouched by it. Again, all have some reaction that they face.
- Most individuals will pull together and function during and after a disaster but their effectiveness is diminished.
- There are mental health concerns noted in all phases of a disaster including preparedness, response and recovery. Being aware of signs and symptoms will help manage the response.
- Disaster stress and grief reactions are normal to an abnormal situation.
- Survivors respond to genuine, active interest and concern from others who are attempting to help them through the disaster.
- Responding practically is often much more effective (listening, encouraging, reassuring) than other psychological assistance as the disaster unfolds.

Research also tells us that there is an increased likelihood for certain behaviors when one has been exposed to a trauma and there are warning signs you, as a leader, may recognize in family, friends or co-workers. If you notice any of the below, it is time to seek mental health treatment:

- Increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Depression or feelings of hopelessness and despair
- Withdrawal from others
- Anxiety, constantly on edge, obsessive fear of another disaster
- Domestic violence, child abuse
- Suicidal or homicidal thoughts or plans
- Inability to care for oneself
- Disorientation, easily confused, cannot remember simple tasks

When you are prepared emotionally to face a crisis, you will find yourself exhibiting characteristics that include kindness, compassion and empathy. See, under stressful situations we all have a tendency to become task-focused, short-fused and demanding. However, it is exactly under a stressful situation where your emotional preparedness can shine. As your family and employees look to you for guidance, what will they see? Will you respond with a sense of fear, despair and hopelessness, or will others find in you strength, comfort and reassurance? This is not to diminish or downplay the tasks at hand, but instead challenge you to look at crisis and how you respond a bit differently.

Research has shown that by possessing the following personality traits, individuals are more apt to lead through a crisis: integrity, gratitude, authenticity, humility and humor. By possessing these traits, you will find yourself able to respond in a crisis in the following ways:

- You will be able to recognize and manage the moods of your employees. This will help you understand and hear what they are experiencing and be able to motivate them through the crisis.
- There will be a sense of flexibility that you find in order to still manage the tasks that need to be completed, but you may find alternative options that allow your team the time and resources they need during the crisis.
- Employees will see you as genuine, sincere and providing hope. This will increase the trust that employees feel for you as their leader and improve the connection; thus, employees will be more motivated under your leadership.

How do you develop these skills so that when faced with a crisis you are emotionally prepared to respond and lead? The USPS Employee Assistance Program is a great resource for you. Through this program that is free to you and members of your household, you can learn and practice techniques designed to enhance your leadership skills and prepare you for when disaster strikes. Through coaching in the EAP, you can clarify your visions, values, intentions and goals that drive you to be an effective leader. These skills can help you not only during tragedy that affects your family, community or workplace but can be valuable during times of personal and professional change. In this confidential, private setting with a trained employee assistance professional, you can learn the traits necessary to be personally prepared for a disaster and lead others through difficult times.

**The EAP is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 800-327-4968 (800-EAP-4YOU) TTY: 877-492-7341.**

Call now to get started by preparing yourself to lead through any future event that may impact your employees, your workplace and your family.

**New Directions Behavioral Health is here for you.  
We're available to talk 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.**

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