

## Coping Facts for

# OLDER ADULTS AFTER A DISASTER

*Each age group is vulnerable in unique ways to the stresses of a disaster. Here are some of the normal things you or a loved one may experience after a disaster. The good news is that most of us will recover emotionally after a disaster in a matter of days or weeks. Older adults, because they have experienced and survived difficult times in their lives, are generally very resilient.*

### **BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS**

Forgetfulness  
Loss of interest in activities  
Withdrawal and isolation  
Reluctance to leave home  
Relocation adjustment problems  
Embarrassment about receiving  
“handouts”

### **PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS**

Headaches  
Aches and pains  
Changes in sleep patterns  
Nightmares  
Overeating or loss of appetite  
Stomach or Bowel problems  
Worsening of chronic illness  
Sleep disorders  
Somatic symptoms  
Physical or sensory limitations

### **EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS**

Sadness or Depression  
Despair about losses  
Apathy  
Confusion - Disorientation  
Suspicion  
Agitation, Irritability  
Anger  
Fears of institutionalization  
Anxiety with unfamiliar surroundings

After we have been through a disaster experience, we may want to isolate ourselves, even from those to whom we are closest. Overcoming the tendency to isolate ourselves takes real strength and discipline, but it is important for healing and recovery.

### **▼ Managing The Isolation Barrier**

It takes courage to reveal what you are thinking and feeling to someone else. Talking can be very comforting and healing. Talking about your fear, anxiety or irritability will help you recover.

- **ASK FOR HELP**—Research shows that people who ask for help come through disasters stronger and healthier than those who view seeking help as a weakness.
- **BE WITH PEOPLE**—Life does not return to normal overnight. You have survived a disaster. That doesn't mean your life is over or that you don't deserve to be happy again. Do something good for yourself.

### ▼ **At-Risk Individuals**

Individuals may be at risk if they have experienced the following:

- series of losses
- loss of independent living due to disaster
- history of trauma
- history of depression or other mental illness.

### ▼ **How to Help Your Friends or Relatives**

- If confusion is a problem, orient the older adult to the environment by frequent references to the date, time, and surroundings
- Frequently touch and call the older adult by name.
- Give additional attention and reassurance.
- Encourage contact with friends and relatives.
- Providing someone to stay with an older adult is often helpful.

### ▼ **When Problems Persist**

- Talk with a counselor or family therapist. With professional assistance, “adjustment reactions” can be dealt with relatively quickly and easily.
- If the person talks about suicide, stay with them and get professional mental health help immediately. If need be take them to an emergency room until they can get the proper mental health assistance.

For more information,  
contact the  
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Mental Health  
Office of  
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