

Disaster Recovery



Working through the loss

"It was the first time I ever really got to know my neighbors."

"When those volunteers came in to help us, I cried to think people are so kind."

"Who's going to care when my harvest income doesn't even cover the loan payments? There's no sandbaggers around then."

"I can't believe that meeting last night; seems like no one agrees on what we need to do."

Could any of these comments be yours? How did you experience the disaster in your community? Chances are, your story is unique. No one is affected in exactly the same way. But, whether you are recovering from property damage and loss, supporting friends or family members who experienced loss, teaching children who are experiencing stress, or just wanting things to return to normal, disaster has affected you.

Community reaction phases

Recovery is a slow process. When many people in a community suffer losses at the same time, community reactions during recovery seem to fit some general phases.

- **Heroic:** During and immediately after a disaster, people tend to react with great courage. They fight threats to safety and basic needs with energy and perseverance. Neighbors and outsiders alike work together to meet the crisis.
- **Honeymoon:** This phase begins a few weeks after the disaster and sometimes lasts several months. People begin their first intense efforts at

cleanup and recovery. Although individuals may have a hard time accepting their losses, they feel that the community still cares about them. People have a feeling of surviving something together. They believe that more help will come.

- **Disillusionment:** This time of widespread discouragement may be the longest phase of recovery. Groups that helped with immediate needs withdraw from the community. People turn inward as they face the reality of their own losses. Some are disappointed in the amount of assistance given. Anger is common; bitterness and disagreement may occur among parts of the community.

- **Reconstruction:** Communities may not move fully into this stage for many months, a year, or more. Reconstruction requires that people recognize both community and individual needs and responsibilities. It also means that the community will not be exactly the same as it was before the disaster. People create a new community as they rebuild together.

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Personal grieving phases

After people experience loss, they grieve for the loss itself, for unfulfilled dreams and goals, and for their “lost” normal life. Phases of grieving for personal loss include:

- **Shock and denial** — characterized by feelings of numbness, disbelief, or confusion.
- **Anger** — expressed through blame, guilt, frustration, fear, or resentment.
- **Depression** — causes fatigue, lack of motivation, desperation, agitation, restlessness, or feelings of isolation.
- **Acceptance** — comes slowly after people are able to reach out, talk about their experiences, find new meaning, explore options, focus, and put a new plan in place.

People do not respond to loss in the same way or at the same time. The stages of grief overlap and may be repeated. There is no right way to experience loss. It is stressful to deal with new demands added to those we already have in our lives. It is helpful, however, to remember that most of the emotional reactions to disaster that we see in ourselves and others are normal reactions of normal people to abnormal circumstances.

But sometimes you or someone you know may need special help in coping with losses. You should seek professional help if a person expresses hopelessness or thoughts of death. Changes in a person’s normal personality, increased use of drugs or alcohol, major changes in eating habits, persistent withdrawal, angry outbursts, or extreme restlessness all may be signs that the person is having great difficulty coping with losses. (See *Encouraging a Friend to Seek Professional Help*, Pm-1214.)

Your ability to adjust to losses is influenced by the severity of the loss, how you view the loss, other stressors in your life, how much change and disruption results from the loss, and how much support you receive from friends, family, and community.

Some things that help in your ability to recover from losses are:

- separating essential from nonessential needs
- being open to alternate ways to meet your needs
- taking care of your physical health
- being determined to survive your losses

Continuous support from friends and family is critical in recovery from disaster. Support can provide comfort, information, emotional encouragement, and motivation.

We are a strong and resilient people. These are difficult times brought about by circumstances beyond our control. One of the greatest strengths we can exhibit during recovery from disaster is the willingness to ask for help and to give help to others. We cannot recreate the heroic actions of the early disaster period. But small acts of kindness and the courage to recognize that we cannot handle everything by ourselves are the heroic acts of recovery.

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... and justice for all

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