

Factsheet: Coping With Trauma Post-Disaster

It is natural to experience emotional stress or trauma during or following a disaster. This factsheet provides a list of resources and steps to share with your clients when coping with the trauma associated with disasters. Agency staff also may utilize the guidance in this document when dealing with post-disaster stress themselves.

This document is meant to provide some information about coping with trauma; however, housing counselors are not trained mental health professionals, and they should always refer clients to helplines and other mental health professionals rather than providing mental health coaching themselves. When in doubt, Housing Counseling Agencies may want to suggest professional help, as necessary, to best serve staff and client needs.



Acknowledgments and Resources

This Coping With Trauma Post-Disaster factsheet was adapted based on the following resources. If counselors are looking for additional information after reviewing this factsheet, they should start by reviewing the information below.

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\): Coping With a Disaster or Traumatic Event](#)
- [Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\): Coping With Disaster](#)
- [American Psychiatric Association: Coping After Disaster, Trauma](#)

REFERRING CLIENTS TO MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

If a client speaks to their housing counselor about experiencing trauma or stress, the counselor should suggest that the client seek help from a mental health professional. Counselors can provide their clients with the links below in order to find the appropriate help:

- [Psychologist Locator](#) (American Psychological Association [APA]): The APA Psychologist Locator allows individuals to search for psychologists using their geographic region. It also allows them to search by provider name or specialty.
- [Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator](#) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA]): This page provides a confidential and anonymous source of information for persons seeking treatment facilities in the United States or U.S. Territories for substance abuse/addiction and/or mental health problems.



- SAMHSA [Disaster Distress Helpline](#):
 - Call (800) 985-5990.
 - Individuals who are deaf or hearing impaired can use their preferred relay service to call (800) 985-5990.
 - Text TalkWithUs to 66746.
 - Spanish speakers in the United States can call (800) 985-5990 or text HABLANOS to 66746.
 - Spanish speakers in Puerto Rico or the U.S. Virgin Islands can call or text HABLANOS to (212) 461-4635.

RESOURCES BY TOPIC

Review the resources for the specific topics below and provide them to your client, as needed.

Reactions to Post-Disaster Trauma

- [Effects of Disasters: Risk and Resilience Factors](#) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]): This factsheet, authored by the VA's National Center for PTSD, provides an overview of the stress reactions involved in disasters.
- [When Terrible Things Happen, What You May Experience](#) (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN] – Psychological First Aid): This page provides a list of common reactions to disasters. NCTSN is administered by SAMHSA.

Managing and Coping With Stress

- [Tips for Survivors of a Disaster or Other Traumatic Event: Managing Stress \(Spanish, Punjabi\)](#) (SAMHSA): This guide for survivors of disasters and other traumatic events provides tips for managing stress.
- [‘Asking for Help’: Do You Know How?](#) (Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress): This factsheet provides an overview of how to seek help for those who are experiencing stress.

Coping and Recovery – Specific Circumstances

- [Alcohol, Medication, and Drug Use After Disaster](#) (NCTSN – Psychological First Aid): This factsheet provides strategies for avoiding alcohol and drug use as a coping mechanism for dealing with disaster stress.
- [Helping Families Deal With the Stress of Relocation After a Disaster](#) (Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry): This handout provides information and tips for managing family stress related to post-disaster relocation.

Resources for Helping Children

- [A Child’s Reaction to Disaster by Age](#) (FEMA): This page provides an overview of common reactions to traumatic events as seen in different age groups.



- [Helping Children and Adolescents Cope With Violence and Disasters – What Parents Can Do](#) (National Institute of Mental Health): This guide provides tips for parents and caregivers to help children overcome traumatic experiences.
- [Tips for Talking With and Helping Children and Youth After a Disaster or Traumatic Event](#) (SAMHSA): This guide for parents, caregivers, and teachers provides strategies for helping children through a traumatic time.
- [Help Kids Cope](#) (NCTSN): This app helps parents and caregivers talk with children about disasters; know what to do before, during, and after 10 disaster types; and know what to say “in the moment” to support kids of all ages.
- [Tips for College Students \(Spanish\)](#) (SAMHSA): This SAMHSA resource provides tips for college students coping with a disaster or traumatic event.

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF STRESS/TRAUMA

Stress and anxiety can manifest itself in a variety of ways following a disaster. The first step for coping with stress and trauma is to recognize the signs. Common signs of distress and trauma include:

- **Emotional reactions:**
 - Experiencing feelings of shock, numbness, and disbelief
 - Feeling anxious or fearful
 - Experiencing anger or a short temper
 - Having difficulty communicating thoughts
 - Feeling withdrawn, disoriented, or confused
 - Having difficulty concentrating
 - Being reluctant to leave home
- **Physical reactions:**
 - Increased headaches, body pains, stomach problems, and skin rashes
 - Changes in energy and activity levels
 - Changes in appetite
 - Increased frequency of insomnia and nightmares
 - Worsening of chronic health problems
 - Changes in the use of alcohol, tobacco, or drugs
 - Tunnel vision or muffled hearing



STEPS FOR DEALING WITH STRESS POST-DISASTER

Once you recognize the signs of stress and trauma, take the following steps to begin coping with these feelings.

- **Acknowledge your feelings.** It is normal to feel anxious about your safety and that of your loved ones. Sadness, grief, and anger are normal reactions to a disaster, and acknowledging your feelings helps you to recover. Remember that everyone has different needs and copes in different ways.
- **Stay informed.** Watch, listen to, or read the news for updates from officials to ensure that you are not missing any information. Be aware that there may be rumors during a crisis, so make sure that you are using reliable news sources.
- **Take care of yourself.** Eat healthy, well-balanced meals; exercise regularly; get plenty of sleep; and avoid alcohol, tobacco, and drugs. Learn more about [wellness strategies](#) for mental health.
- **Take mental breaks.** Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories if you have already informed yourself about the facts, as it can cause further stress to repeatedly hear and see images about the crisis. Try to do other activities that you enjoy and limit your exposure to news coverage to set times of the day.
- **Connect with others.** Share your concerns and how you are feeling with a friend or family member. Maintain healthy relationships and build a strong support system.
- **Seek help.** Accept help from community resources when you can. Seek help from professional counselors who deal with post-disaster stress.

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DISASTER

Disasters can leave children of all ages frightened, confused, and anxious. Children may be affected by a disaster if they have personally experienced it, seen it on television, or heard it discussed by adults. It is important for adults to be informed and prepared to help children who are experiencing post-disaster stress.

- **Set an example.** The way children cope with disasters or emergencies is often tied to the way they see their parents or guardians coping. Parents and guardians can make disasters less traumatic for children by taking steps to manage their own feelings and coping. Try to re-establish daily routines for work, school, meals, and rest as soon as possible.
- **Engage children in a family disaster plan.** Having children help prepare a family disaster plan can establish a sense of control and build confidence before a disaster. Preparing for a disaster helps everyone in the family accept the fact that disasters do happen and provides an opportunity to identify and collect the resources needed post-disaster. View the [Home and Family Preparedness Checklist](#) to get started on making a family disaster plan.



HOUSING COUNSELING DISASTER RECOVERY TOOLKIT



- **Encourage children to share their thoughts and feelings.** Adults should help children find **ways to express themselves**. Create an **open and supportive environment** in which children know that they can ask questions. At the same time, do not force children to talk until they are ready. If a child has difficulty expressing feelings, encourage the child to draw a picture or tell a story.
- **Listen to children's concerns and clarify misunderstandings.** Calmly provide factual information about disaster events and current plans for safety and recovery. Give children **honest answers and information**. Clarify misunderstandings and misinformation by listening to children's concerns and answering questions. Gear your explanations to the child's age, language, and developmental level.
- **Monitor and limit exposure to the media.** Disaster-related news coverage may cause fear and anxiety in children (particularly for large-scale disasters or terrorist events). Repeated images of an event may cause children to believe that the event is recurring over and over. If children have access to television and internet where images or news about the disaster are shown, adults should be with them to encourage communication and provide explanations.
- **Use support networks.** Build and use support systems of family, friends, community organizations and agencies, faith-based institutions, or other resources that work for your family. Some children may need extra support and attention. Some signs that a child may need additional help include ongoing sleep disturbances, intrusive thoughts or worries, preoccupation with concerns about the event, or recurring fears about death. If these behaviors persist, ask your child's pediatrician, family physician, or school counselor to help arrange an appropriate referral.