

## Protecting Mental Health In The Wake Of Natural Disasters

(NAPSA)—The often sudden and overwhelming devastation and destruction caused by hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes and other natural disasters take an emotional toll on millions of people each year. Many survivors experience anxiety, trouble sleeping, depression and substance misuse. Help protect your mental health by learning ways to cope before, during and after these stressful events.

### Emotional Impact: Before, During And After Natural Disaster

Knowing that a storm, tornado or other destructive event is coming can stir anxiety. Receiving continuous updates and warnings in the news can cause a heightened state of alert. This level of alert is particularly common in regions that frequently experience disasters: coastal communities vulnerable to hurricanes, towns on fault lines where earthquakes are likely, Tornado Alley, and dry regions prone to wildfires.

After a disaster, the task of rebuilding can cause additional stress and sleeplessness. Others may experience grief and depression stemming from personal injuries or the loss of life, home or employment.

In the wake of a disaster, it's important to watch for several common warning signs of emotional distress. They include:

- Eating or sleeping too much or too little
- Pulling away from people and things
- Having low or no energy
- Having unexplained aches and pains, such as constant stomachaches or headaches
- Feeling helpless or hopeless; constant worrying
- Excessive smoking, drinking or using drugs, including prescription medications
- Thinking of hurting or killing yourself or someone else
- Having difficulty readjusting to home or work life.

The anniversary of an event may also renew feelings of fear, anxiety and sadness. Certain reminders such as sounds, like sirens, can trigger emotional distress. These and other environmental sensations can take survivors right back to the disaster or cause fear that it's about to happen again.

### Coping in the Event of a Natural Disaster

It's normal to have difficulty managing your feelings about natural disasters. However, not dealing with the stress of these events can be harmful to your men-



**Take steps to protect your physical and mental well-being before severe weather hits.**

tal and physical health. Here are healthy ways to cope when disaster strikes:

- Limit your consumption of news. The constant replay of news stories about a disaster on TV, radio and the Internet can increase stress and anxiety. Reduce your news intake and engage in relaxing activities instead, like spending time with loved ones.
- Get enough "good" sleep. If you have trouble sleeping, only go to bed when you are ready to sleep, avoid using cell phones or laptops in bed, and avoid drinking caffeine or alcohol for at least one hour before going to bed. If you wake up and can't fall back to sleep, try writing in a journal.
- Take care of pets or spend time in nature when it's safe. Nature and animals can help us feel better when we're down. Spend time with your pet outdoors or go for a hike.
- Know when to ask for help. Pay attention to what's going on with you. What may seem like everyday stress can be depression, anxiety or alcohol/drug abuse. If you or someone you know is in need of extra help, contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Distress Helpline ([www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline](http://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline)), which provides free, confidential crisis counseling 24/7.

Preparing can help reduce the potentially devastating impact of natural disasters. Know how to protect your physical and mental well-being so you, your family and community can be ready to rebound, rebuild and recover.

SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline provides crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. Call (800) 985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.