



# PREPARING FOR AND COPING WITH THE EFFECTS OF A DISASTER OR EMERGENCY



If you have been affected by a disaster or emergency, or even if you are concerned about one happening, you may feel increased distress. Taking small, positive steps will help you feel better and more in control.

The Red Cross has gathered some information on how you can prepare, and tips for taking care of yourself and others when you are facing a disaster or emergency.



# PREPARING YOURSELF AND OTHERS

## KNOW THE RISKS

Disasters and emergencies can impact you not only physically, but also emotionally. They cause significant disruption and add stress to your life. They can exacerbate pre-existing health and mental health issues, and the increased stress felt during disasters and emergencies can disrupt your routines.

It is helpful to prepare for the emotional and social impacts of disasters by understanding how you respond to stress and build your resilience to cope.

## ANTICIPATE AND IDENTIFY

how you think you will react.

How will you think and feel?

A variety of reactions are common when you are recovering from a disaster or emergency. Most of these reactions are temporary. These reactions can increase if we are facing the possibility of another disaster.

### You may:

- Feel sad, overwhelmed, angry, frustrated, worried, exhausted physically or mentally;
- Have difficulty making decisions, staying focused on tasks at hand, or unable to plan daily activities;
- Experience changes in appetite or sleep patterns or increase alcohol or substance use.

### Children may also:

- Behave aggressively;
- Cling to caregivers;
- Regress to the behaviour of younger children, such as thumb-sucking or bedwetting.

Coping with and recovering from the effects of a disaster or emergency can take a long time. Coping is the process of managing difficult circumstances and finding ways to tolerate the effects of stress. Acknowledge whatever reactions you may have.

## RECOVERING FROM THE DISASTER OR EMERGENCY

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

It is important to find ways of coping with stress. The following suggestions may help you take care of yourself and others:

- Ensure you have a safe place to stay and that your basic needs are met.
- Eat nutritiously and stay hydrated.
- Get enough rest and adequate sleep. Rest provides your body and mind a break, which will increase your ability to cope.
- Avoid isolation by reaching out. If you find yourself in new surroundings, reach out to those around you. Giving and receiving support is important.
- Be patient with yourself and with those close to you. Others may be struggling to cope with the disaster and may need your patience and support.
- Be flexible and prepared to engage in new activities.
- Take it slow. Small steps are helpful when tasks seem overwhelming. Only do what you can.
- Seek out assistance and resources. Gather information that will help you and your family meet your needs.
- Stay positive and make plans. Remind yourself of how you've successfully gotten through difficult times in the past.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP CHILDREN:

- Give extra time, hugs and patience.
- Provide reassurance of your family's safety and recovery plans.
- Involve them in activities to assist others; it can help them cope.
- Let them know how things might look different this year. Ask for their feelings.

## GET CONNECTED

Our connections with others are critical to increasing resilience and recovery after disasters. It can be helpful to think about the following questions when we prepare:

- **Who are the people in your networks of support, friends and family, that you can turn to when you experience increased stress?**  
Be specific, and let these people know that they are your support people in the event of disasters/emergencies. Be sure to list out of town contacts.
- **Who do you consider to be in your community? Who do you already know? Who are your neighbours?**  
Introduce yourself. Start a conversation about how an emergency might affect your community. Talk about community strengths, and any gaps that need attention, and identify those who might need more help.
- **What services do you and your loved one's access in your local community to increase wellbeing and decrease stress?**  
This could be recreational activities, as well as formal services like counselling. Think about how you will continue these activities in a disaster or emergency.



## GET ORGANIZED

Being organized helps us have a sense of control after an emergency. Here are a few things to consider:

- How will you connect with your family members, including your children, after disasters or emergencies?
- Are you or your loved ones actively managing any physical or mental health conditions?
- List medications or medical assistance of any kind you currently rely on in your self-care plan and include in your kit.
- What are the things in your life that cannot be replaced, and that have great meaning for you or your loved ones? Think about ways you can protect these things in an emergency. Some people find it comforting to bring something that reminds them of their home/community with them in an evacuation.
- How will you manage and care for your pets in a disaster/emergency? Pets may be a significant part of our lives, and provide comfort and support.

## MAKE A PLAN

It can be helpful to make a plan for taking care of yourself and others, in advance of a disaster or emergency. You can ask yourself some of the following questions and write the answers down:

- How do I recognize when I am stressed, or when those around me are stressed? How do I act and what do I feel? Anticipating, monitoring and understanding these reactions will really help you during an emergency.
- What are the personal things in my life, or the activities I do, to help me cope or make me resilient? This could include physical, emotional, relationships, spiritual and cultural supports
- How do I cope with stress?
- What are three things I can do to decompress after a stressful experience?
- How will I know when I need additional help or support?

## WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

If you continue to feel overwhelmed, can't shake feelings of despair or anxiety, or find yourself or a loved one experiencing some of the feelings and reactions listed below for two weeks or more, this may be a sign that you need to reach out for additional support. Seek help through your family doctor, spiritual care or community organization. Asking for help is a sign of strength.

- Feelings of intense sadness, hopelessness and/or guilt
- Short temper or outbursts of anger
- Difficulty eating or sleeping
- Lost interest in things that were enjoyable
- Increased physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach aches
- Avoiding family and friends
- Increasing alcohol or substance use

## RESOURCES

### Acknowledgements:

The Canadian Red Cross gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, the Australian Red Cross, and American Red Cross materials to this booklet.

### Disclaimer

The information provided in this publication is for reference only. It should not be considered as a substitute for consulting with specialists about particular situations. The Canadian Red Cross Society recommends seeking advice from a qualified health professional if you have or continue to experience a crisis. The Canadian Red Cross makes no guarantee, warranty or other similar representation as to the quality or completeness of the information contained in this document and under no circumstance shall the Canadian Red Cross be held liable to any person relying on the information contained herein.

