



MENTAL HEALTH

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Managing your mental health condition during a disaster

Learn how to manage a mental health condition during a disaster. This may include having medications available, working out a plan for therapy, and taking positive self-care steps.

A natural disaster, widespread disease outbreak or other emergency can cause mental health issues for those who live through the trauma. If you're already coping with a mental health problem and disaster strikes, how do you manage your mental health condition if health care services and community resources are disrupted, whether for days or even weeks?

Here are some strategies to guide your management of a mental health condition during a disaster.

Plan ahead for mental health issues during disaster

One of the major problems with a disaster is that normal routines and services can be disrupted for an unknown length of time. You can take steps ahead of time to reduce unpleasant surprises if a disaster does occur.

- **Talk to your health professional.** If you're currently seeing a therapist, psychiatrist or other health care professional for mental health issues, consider talking to him or her about disaster plans. Although major disasters are unlikely, being prepared for one can help you weather it better if it does occur. Some points you can talk about may include getting to the clinic, changing appointments, alternate locations, how you can care for yourself, or even any general concerns about a disaster and how you'll be affected.
- **Have an emergency survival kit.** Be sure to have a stocked survival kit on hand. Such kits typically include fresh water, ready-to-eat foods, flashlights, first-aid supplies, basic tools and personal hygiene products.
- **Have a contact network.** If you have a serious mental illness and need help from others for daily living tasks, be sure to talk to them about a disaster plan. Have ways to contact each other in an emergency. Make sure people know to check on you.

Managing medications during a disaster

If you take medications to help manage your mental health condition, it's especially important to plan ahead.

- **Have a buffer supply.** If possible, always keep at least a few days' supply of your medications on hand. During a disaster, you may not be able to get a refill immediately. Phone lines may be down and your pharmacy may be closed or you may not be able to travel.

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supply means you won't suddenly find yourself without medication. However, be sure to talk to your health insurance provider in advance about its prescription refill requirements. Some companies may have policies that prevent you from having a buffer supply.

- **Consider a visit to the ER.** In rare cases, some people take medications that are closely monitored every day or every few days by a health care professional. You may not be able to keep extra pills on hand. If a disaster strikes in this case, you may need to get to the nearest emergency room for help with your medications.
- **Understand how to store your medications.** It's important to store medications securely and safely. Some medications must be stored within certain temperature ranges so that they don't spoil. Take a few minutes now to talk to your doctor or pharmacist about how to store your specific medications properly. You can also read the instructions that come with your medications. Although you may not be able to store your medications this way in a disaster, you'll know what to aim for. Your doctor or pharmacist can also tell you if it's safe to take your medications if they haven't been stored as they should be.

Managing therapy during a disaster

Therapy services, just as with other health care services, may be disrupted during disasters.

- **Plan for disruption.** Although each disaster will have its own degree of disrupted services, keep in mind that anything but the most essential services are likely to be temporarily disrupted. Prepare yourself now for possible closures so that you aren't faced with unpleasant surprises. Consider talking to your therapist now about possibly trying to connect by phone or e-mail during a disaster.
- **Call on your skills.** If you can't get to a therapy session, use that time to reflect on what you've learned in therapy. Remember the healthy coping tools you've learned and the problem-solving skills you've gained. Use positive self-talk to help chase away negative thoughts.
- **Do your own version of group therapy.** If you attend group therapy, consider talking to the group about disaster plans. If it's appropriate, can you try to contact some group members if disaster strikes? Even if you can't connect in person, you can still remind yourself about the skills you've learned in group and apply them to coping with a disaster.

Self-care strategies during a disaster

One of the ironic things about disasters is that they have the potential to bring out the best in people. People who are struggling with a mental illness may find that experiencing a disaster may not be entirely negative. Indeed, you may find that you're much stronger than you gave yourself credit for. You may also see people helping each other in ways you never thought possible — the world may not seem so uncaring after all.

Here are some self-care tips to help keep a positive attitude even under the worst conditions:

- **Get in touch with disaster workers.** Remember that health care professionals are trained in disaster management. Hospitals and clinics have disaster plans in place. Take reassurance in that. In addition, agencies such as the Red Cross have trained disaster mental health professionals. They can guide you to the help you may need.
- **Touch base with others.** If it's possible, connect with family, friends, faith groups and others who can offer you help, comfort and support. People can work together to solve problems and encourage each other. Let them know if you need help.
- **Help someone else.** If you're able, lend help to someone who's less

- **help someone else.** If you're able, lend help to someone who's less fortunate. This can give you a huge morale boost and make you feel better about yourself, besides helping the other person.
- **Build skills for resilience.** People who are resilient can weather hardships and stress better than those who aren't. Even if you're coping with depression, anxiety or other mental health conditions, you can still have resilience. Key ways to build resilience include developing a strong support network, having goals, thinking well of yourself and remaining flexible.
- **Keep a positive frame of mind.** Look for even small nuggets of hope and good during a disaster. This can help you find meaning and purpose, help you think positively about the future, and help you function even in the worst of times.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

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