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HURRICANE PREPARATION AND COPING TIPS

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HURRICANES: COPING STRATEGIES FOR STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

In the aftermath of a major Hurricane, you may be deeply involved in the rescue and evacuation efforts surrounding this disaster. The tragedies you are witnessing, the long hours you are working, and the stress of dealing with others' needs along with your own frustrations and personal losses will be physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting. In the days and weeks ahead, you can expect to experience many strong emotions including anger, despair, guilt, powerlessness and cynicism. These feelings are normal and are not signs of weakness,. You are human and need to take care of yourself before you can summon energy to take care of others.

Here are some strategies to help you manage during this stressful time:

- **Take stock of how you are feeling.** Realize that the feelings of distress or anger in yourself and other workers are legitimate and not the signs of professional weakness or lack of professionalism.
- **Make sure you take a break from the action.** If possible, get away from the area where you are working, either in outside the relief site or in a room at the back of the shelter
- **Take care of your body.** As best as you can, pay attention to eating properly and getting some rest. Taking time away from you assignment to eat, drink, clean up or rest may seem like a waste of your time, but it will help you work at peak efficiency and do a better job with fewer errors.
- **Avoid using alcohol or drugs or engaging in other risky behaviors to deal with the stress and pressure.** If you feel these are the only ways you can manage the pain, anxiety, rage, fear or other emotions you are experience, ask for help.
- **Talk to other co-workers or volunteers about your experiences and reactions.** You need to share your stories, too. Make sure that you get support from others, not only to deal with the symptoms of stress, but to identify and deal with the sources of the stress.

When you return home after this taxing assignment, make sure to take part in any debriefing procedures that your organization offers. Take a break from work and talk with other professionals (such as counselors) to help you process the events you have been a part of. After this tragedy, you will need time to get back into a "normal" life again.

HURRICANES: COPING WITH EVACUATION

The emergency evacuations caused by a major Hurricane may have left you and your family displaced, with feelings of loss – loss of loved ones, community, contact with family and friends and special belongings such as your home and family mementos. At this point, you may live in a stressful, overcrowded place without adequate food and water, sharing space with people you do not know. You have probably suffered through distressing and alarming experiences, which may lead to shock, confusion, anxiety and alarm.

You may feel sad, angry, confused, worried about the future and even guilty. From one minute to the next, you may cry and then laugh. All feelings and reactions are normal; each person reacts uniquely. While these events will take a few weeks to fully process, here are some strategies to help you cope in the meantime:

- Stay with family members or other familiar people for comfort.
- Try to carve out a clean space for you and your family.
- Get involved in productive activities at your shelter or temporary community.
 - Get older children involved by having them look after younger children.
 - Help prepare food, construct shelters or help relay information to others.
 - Volunteer your services if you have a special skill such as carpentry, nursing, masonry or teaching.
- Create play areas and organize games for children.
- Support one another – tell your story and listen to others tell theirs to help deal with all of the events that have happened.
- Continue your religious or centering practices such as prayer, meditation or exercise.
- Use counseling services, if they are available, even if you don't feel an immediate need. Sharing your story will help.

If you have children:

Your children will have strong feelings about this disaster. They may not show it, but they need your help in understanding and coping.

- Talk to your child every day. Ask them how they are doing and what worries them most.
- Let children know that it is okay to be upset or angry.
- Reassure them that you will be there and will take care of them.
- Be honest and open about the disaster. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know" and keep discussions about their experiences open and honest.

HURRICANES: DEALING WITH STRESS

If your community was hit hard by a Hurricane, you're probably trying to pick up the pieces and make sense of what happened. An event such as this creates a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety for those both directly and indirectly affected. In the days and weeks to come, you may begin having some of these common reactions:

- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation; difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Apathy and emotional numbing
- Nightmares and reoccurring thoughts about the event
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness and depression
- Feeling powerless
- Changes in eating patterns; loss of appetite or overeating
- Excessive crying
- Headaches, back pains and stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping or falling asleep
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs

Tips for Coping

It's normal to have difficulty managing your feelings after major tragedies. Because everyone experiences stress differently, don't compare yourself with others around you or judge other people's reactions and emotions. Here are some tips for coping with stress:

- **Talk about it.** By talking with others about the event, you can relieve stress and realize that others share your experience and feelings.
- **Spend time with friends and family.** They can help you through this tough time. If your family lives outside the area, stay in touch by phone if possible. If you have children, encourage them to share their feelings and concerns with you.
- **Take care of yourself.** Get as much rest and exercise as possible. Try to continue your religious practices, or centering activities.
- **Take one thing at a time.** Getting things back to normal can seem impossible. Break the job up into doable tasks. Complete that task first and then move on to the next one. Completing each task will give you a sense of accomplishment and make things seem less overwhelming.
- **If you can, help.** Give blood, help prepare meals for others including the elderly. Volunteer to help clean up or rebuild your community. Read to children in the shelter. Helping others can give you a sense of purpose in a situation that feels beyond control.

- **Avoid drugs and excessive drinking.** Drugs and alcohol may seem to help you feel better, but in the long run they generally create additional problems that compound the stress you're already feeling.
- **Ask for help if you need it.** If your stress is so strong it gets in the way of your daily life, talk with someone. Don't try to go it alone. You can start with a trusted friend, relative or minister. You may want to talk with a mental health professional to discuss how well you are coping with recent events. This could be especially important for people who had existing mental health problems or those who've survived past trauma. You could also join a support group. Don't try to go it alone. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness.

HURRICANES: HELPING CHILDREN COPE

Children respond differently to disaster, depending on their understanding and maturity, but it's easy to see how an event like a major Hurricane could leave a child feeling a good deal of anxiety. Kids who lived in the track of a major hurricane felt firsthand the threat of danger to themselves and those they care about. Now that the danger has passed, it's important to comfort your children and reassure them that they're safe. It's also important to be open and honest with them in discussing unseen consequences of the hurricane for your family.

Pre-School Age Children

Such behaviors as bed-wetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, or fear of sleeping alone may worsen in young children or reappear in others. Children may complain of stomach cramps or headaches and be reluctant to go to school. It's important to remember that these children are not being bad. They're afraid and their feelings are real.

Here are some ways to help preschoolers cope with their fears:

- **Reassure them that they're safe.** Provide extra comfort and contact by discussing the child's fears at bedtime and giving them plenty of hugs.
- **Get a better understanding of their feelings about the entire event.** Talk with them and find out each child's particular fears and concerns. Answer all their questions, responding with respect and comfort.
- **Structure children's play** so that it serves as a constructive outlet for expressing fear or anger.
- **Try to create routines for them** - e.g., daily walks, consistent bed times.
- **Let them talk in groups or play about their experiences.**

Grade School-Aged Children

Children this age ask many questions and it's important that you try to answer them in clear and simple language. If a child is concerned about a parent who is distressed, don't tell a child not to worry—that will just make him or her worry more.

Here are several other things to remember with this age group:

- **Be realistic in your reassurances.** Don't say disasters can't happen again. Children will know this isn't true. Instead, say, "You're safe now and I'll always try to protect you." Remind children that disasters are very rare.
- **Monitor children's television viewing.** Seeing replayed images of the hurricane and its damage can be frightening to children, especially if they think the event is happening all over again. Limit the amount of media coverage they see. Schedule activities—dinner, a walk, story reading, drawing, or a movie - during the evening news hours. Talk with them about what they have seen on T.V. and their reactions.
- **Encourage expression through play or drawing.** As with younger children, school-aged children sometimes find comfort in expressing themselves through playing games or drawing scenes of the disaster. Encourage them to do so and then talk about it.

- **Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."** Part of keeping discussions open and honest is not being afraid to say you don't have all the answers. Explain that disasters of this kind cause troublesome feelings even in adults.

Adolescents

Adolescents often try to downplay their worries. It's generally a good idea to talk about them anyway, keeping the lines of communication open and honest about the emotional, physical, and financial impact of the hurricane on your family. When adolescents are frightened, they may express their fear through acting out or regressing to younger behavior.

When dealing with teens, remember to:

- **Provide careful supervision and additional support**, especially for those teenagers with pre-existing emotional problems such as depression.
- **Ask, as part of dinner conversation, how or if the hurricane was discussed at school.**
- **Monitor their media exposure to the event**, including information received on the Internet.

Help children find ways to help others – no matter what age the child. Helping others to deal with tragedy can reassure and help the child cope. Children can draw pictures to give to others, write letters or volunteer to help prepare meals.

HURRICANES: SURVIVING SUDDEN LOSS

The death of a loved one is painful enough but when death is sudden and combined with the loss of home, community and security, as during a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina, it doubles our pain and intensifies the grief. Mourning and recovery are more difficult for surviving family members, regardless of their age. Many survivors will be in denial of the tragedy, some for a very long time.

Children's Response to Loss

In general, losing a parent, sibling, relative or friend will mean losing a sense of security for a child. While pre-school aged children have difficulty understanding that death is not temporary, older children, between the ages of five and nine, begin to experience and express their grief.

Children express grief in a variety of ways, including appearing to be unaffected. But, no matter how a child appears on the outside, there may be grief beneath the surface. Here are some common ways children respond to a death and loss:

- anxiety or panic
- unexplained anger
- boisterous play
- crying often and easily
- trouble concentrating
- sleeplessness
- loss of appetite or other eating disruption
- increased physical complaints or illnesses
- acting younger, possibly reverting to bed wetting, thumb sucking or baby talk
- fear of being alone
- sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school

Helping Children Cope with a Loss

- **Be patient when responding.** It can take them a long time to recover from a loss. Expect strong reminders, such as the holidays or the anniversary of a death, to bring back grief.
- **Keep children's routines as regular as possible.** Children grieve not only for the person but also for changes in the household and environment of family and friends.
- **Offer children choices, when possible, in what they do or don't do to express their feelings about the death.** Help the child plant a tree or dedicate a place in memory of the person who died.
- **Give children a chance to talk about their feelings, but don't push them to talk.** Children, like adults, need time to grieve and be upset. Let them know you are ready to listen and provide reassurance when they express their feelings. To lessen confusion, avoid expressions such as "passed on" or "went to sleep." Answer their questions about death simply and honestly, but, only offer details they can absorb. Don't overload them with information.
- **In the case of natural disasters like hurricanes and floods, expect children to become fearful, or re-experience their grief and sense of loss.**

Adults' Response to Loss

Some common ways that adults respond to a death and loss include:

- Feeling numb, emotionless or lost
- Feeling cheated
- Feeling guilt over failure to protect their loved one
- Feeling frustration, anger, fear or uncertainty
- Having problems concentrating and making decisions
- Overworking
- Forgetting things
- Having trouble with changes in routine
- Calling in sick frequently

Helping Yourself and Others with Loss

The more sudden and unexpected the death or loss, the harder it is for people to express support. Often, the fear of saying or doing something “wrong” keeps people from offering support. Remember, the more tragic and unexpected the event, the greater the need for support.

Here are some ways to help yourself:

- **Do your mourning now.** Being brave is important but don't miss an opportunity to cry. It's not self indulgent, but a sensible and honest way to deal with your emotions.
- **Hiding your feelings do not make them go away or ease your pain.** Express your feelings.
- **Remember that people do recover from sudden loss** and that you too can move through this terrible pain and begin to heal.
- **Bear in mind that emotional pain isn't constant.** We will love forever but we don't need to grieve forever to honor that love.
- **Get support from others** – counselors, support groups, bereavement groups, compassionate friends, or other sudden loss survivors. You may find them through a hospice, place of worship, or community or social agency.

Here are ways to help others:

- **Acknowledge the loss in some way.** Send a card. Help to plan a memorial service. Observe a moment of silence at a community event.
- **Offer help to the family** by making a meal, providing transportation or babysitting a child.
- **Offer words of sympathy.** Speak from the heart, but be mindful of the different ways in which people mourn.

If your stress doesn't begin to subside or is so strong it interferes with your ability to function in daily life, talk with a trusted relative, friend, doctor or clergy. You may want to make an appointment with a mental health professional. This could be especially important for people who had existing mental health problems or those who've survived past trauma. Don't try to go it alone. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness.