

Managing flood-related distress by building resilience

Reports of record-high water levels flooding communities or water breaking through sandbag barriers or dikes are enough to create stress and anxiety for anyone living or working nearby. The anticipation of destruction created by flooding can summon up feelings of worry, fear, anger and uncertainty.

You can take steps today to reduce stressful emotions in the midst of the flood-related chaos by strengthening your resilience. Resilience is the process of adapting while facing adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or other sources of stress. By strengthening your resilience, you will be better able to persevere through the challenges posed by the flooding of your home, workplace and community.

Here are some ways you can build emotional resilience and strengthen your sense of control during this difficult time.

Make connections. It's easy to feel alone with your worries and other negative reactions. Connecting with close family members, friends and neighbors can be a source of strength and support. By discussing some of the challenges you are experiencing, you may discover you are not alone. After disasters, local support groups are hosted by trained and experienced professionals. People can feel a sense of relief and comfort by connecting with other survivors who have had similar reactions and emotions. Another way to make connections is to reach out and help others who are also facing similar challenges. Helping others can give you a sense of accomplishment, self-worth and purpose.

Avoid seeing crisis as an insurmountable problem. You can't stop the flood waters, but you can change how you interpret and respond to them. Try to see beyond the current crisis to how future circumstances may be a little better. Note any subtle ways in which you might already feel better as you make progress containing water damage or cleaning up following the flood.

Take a news break. Watching replays of flood footage can increase your distress. Often, the media tries to interest viewers by presenting worst-case scenarios. These may or may not be representative of what's happening to your home or community.

Accept that change is a part of living. Certain goals may no longer be attainable because of your home and community being flooded. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on the things you can change.

Move toward your goals. Develop some realistic goals. Do something regularly—even if it seems like a small accomplishment—that enables you to move toward your goals. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself, "What's one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?"

Take decisive actions. Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive actions, rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away. Although floods can uproot people from their normal routines, establish new routines as soon as you can, even if they may have to change again once the flood and cleanup are over.

Look for opportunities for self-discovery. People often learn something about themselves and may find that they have grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, greater sense of strength, increased sense of self-worth, a more developed spirituality and heightened appreciation for life.

Nurture a positive view of yourself. You are persevering through difficult circumstances. That's an accomplishment. Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts helps build resilience.

Keep things in perspective. Even when facing significant water damage and a long flood cleanup, try to consider these stressful circumstances in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. You've tackled past hardships that may have felt overwhelming at the time. Tap into those successful skills to get through current challenges. Maintain a hopeful outlook. An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear.

Take care of yourself. Engage in healthy behaviors that will enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Be patient in the midst of the chaos. You may not feel like it, but eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience difficulties sleeping, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs since these can increase feelings of sadness or distress and hamper your progress in successfully managing current circumstances.

For many people, using the resilience-building strategies described above may be sufficient to get through the current crisis. At times, however, an individual can get stuck or have difficulty managing intense reactions. A licensed mental health professional such as an EAP, counselor or psychologist, can help you develop an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if you feel like you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living.

Persevere and trust in your ability to get through the challenging days ahead. Following the resilience-building recommendations in this guide may be helpful.

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