

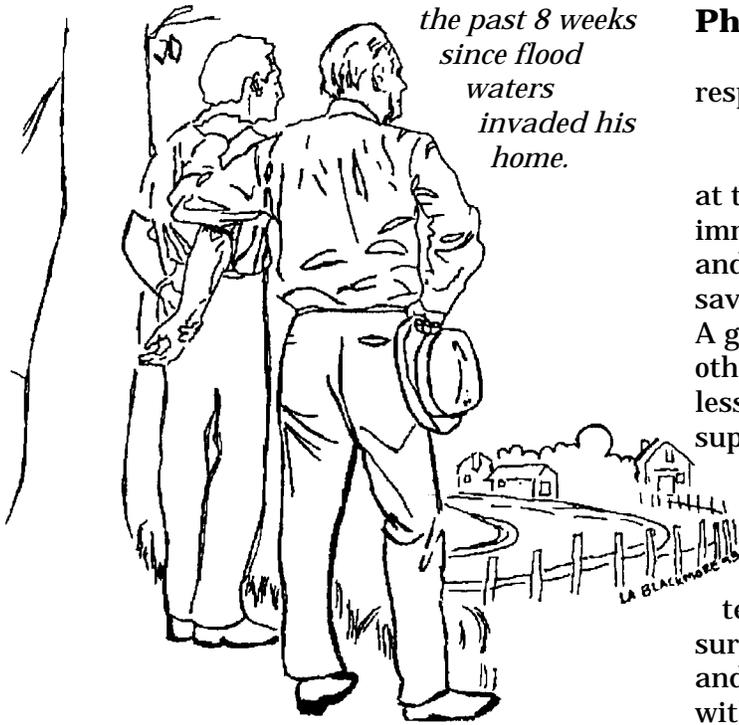


# ***Flood of Emotions... Will It Ever End?***

Kansas State University • Cooperative Extension Service • Manhattan, Kansas

- *Some residents loudly criticize community leaders for not adequately preparing residents for flooding. Local relief workers, feeling their efforts were hampered by red tape, express anger. Victims voice anger toward relief workers both for interfering with their lives and for not doing enough to help.*
- *A "normal" 8 year-old boy is terrified during thunderstorms. A 4 year-old boy sleeps with all his clothes on. The rest of his belongings are packed in a suitcase at the foot of his bed.*
- *Steve puts on his rain gear with boots and goes outside to observe his neighborhood during the current rain. He paces up and down the block, monitoring water levels and storm drains until the rain has ended and the gutters are clear. Steve has performed this ritual each time it has rained for*

*the past 8 weeks since flood waters invaded his home.*



- *Martha, whose house somehow escaped flood damage has stomach cramps, loss of appetite, and severe headaches. A medical evaluation concludes that she is suffering a severe anxiety attack. A mental health professional suggests the woman feels very guilty because she was spared the loss suffered by her neighbors.*

Many Kansans may experience long term disaster-related stress symptoms. As people become aware of the extent of the disaster, the limitations of government assistance, and the costs of rebuilding, they are likely to experience problems in coping. The types of long-term problems that most frequently occur are depression, grief, anger, guilt, fear, and in extreme cases bizarre behavior, violence or suicide. At times, it seem like life may never return to normal.

## **Phases of disaster**

People go through different phases in response to natural disaster.

**Heroic Phase**—This period usually occurs at the time of the disaster and during the time immediately afterward. People are called upon and respond to demands for heroic action to save their own and others' lives and property. A great deal of energy is expended helping others survive and recover. There are countless examples of courage, generosity, and support. People focus on the immediate needs of those who are in danger.

**Honeymoon Phase**—This period typically begins one week after the disaster and can last six months. Those who have survived have a strong sense of having shared and lived through a catastrophic experience with others. People feel supported and encour-

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aged by official agencies who promise assistance. The cleanup process begins with an anticipation that more help will be available.

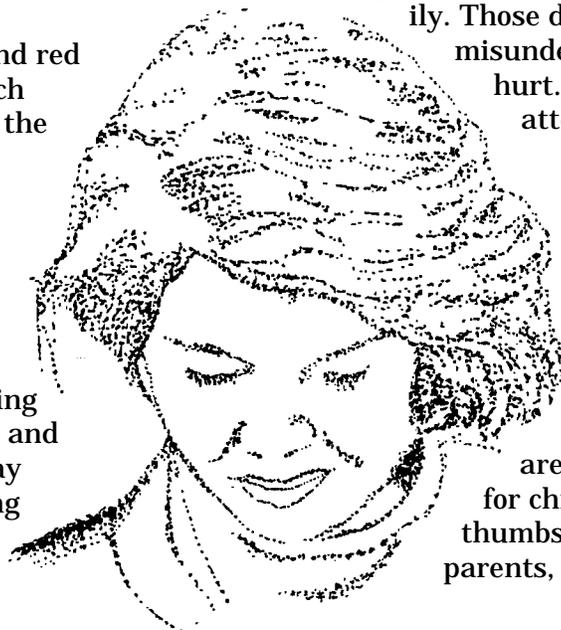
**Disillusionment Phase**—This period may last from two months to two or more years. If promises of aid are not fulfilled as expected, strong feelings of anger, resentment, and bitterness may occur. Outside agencies need to leave, and local community groups may weaken. There may be a gradual loss of the “shared community” as victims concentrate on rebuilding on their own. People may feel isolated and communities can become divided and hostile.

**Reconstruction Phase**—This phase generally lasts for several years following the disaster. Victims have come to realize that they need to rebuild their own lives, homes, farms, and businesses with little assistance from others. They have gradually assumed responsibility for the tasks. Signs of progress are evident, new buildings, construction projects, and new programs and plans. These all reaffirm people’s belief in their community and in their own capabilities. Community groups with long-term investment in the community become key elements during this phase.

### What you can expect

As people try to put their lives back together, they may find that:

- Bureaucratic hassles and red tape consume hours each day, even months after the disaster;
- Financial losses may lead to worry, depression, and a change in lifestyle. Some people may try to work extra jobs for money, increasing their feelings of fatigue and stress. Other people may have a hard time finding work.



- The approaching cold weather may lead people to feel pressured to push themselves harder in order to finish reconstruction and repair of damage.
- Long-term stress may result in health problems. It is common for people under continued stress to experience headaches, stomach or intestinal problems, high blood pressure, heart problems, frequent colds and viruses, and allergies.
- Once the family has moved back into their home they may experience mixed emotions: feelings of relief and joy as well as sadness and fear. Sadness is usually due to reminders of things lost. These feelings are all normal.
- Many events may cause feelings of sadness during the first year following a disaster. Birthdays, holidays, and anniversary of the disaster often remind people of how things used to be and the things that have been changed or lost. It is important to have an opportunity to grieve for things that were lost.
- Family relationships may become strained from all of the stress. Couples may be hurt and wonder why they are not getting along, are not feeling close, or are thinking of separating. People may grieve differently even in the same family. Those differences may lead to misunderstanding, isolation and hurt. Relationships need as much attention and care as physical property.
- People commonly become nervous or irritable in rainy weather. Some may find themselves crying without knowing why. Trouble sleeping or bad dreams are common. It is not unusual for children to revert to thumbsucking, clinging to their parents, or bedwetting.



## Response to stress

Although everyone who survives a natural disaster experiences stress, some age groups seem to be more vulnerable to the stresses of a disaster. As compared to the general population,

young children and older adults are subject to greater emotional and physical trauma. Adolescents may experience disruption of their peer group activities. The specific problems experienced will vary depending upon the phase of the post-disaster period. While some problems will appear immediately, others appear several months later. Adults will respond to stress differently than children.

**Children**—Children are likely to experience sleep disturbances and night terrors, persistent fears about natural events, fears of future disasters, and loss of interest in school. They are also likely to feel a loss of personal responsibility, which is evident through behaviors that are typical of a child much younger.

**Adults**—Adults may experience anxiety, depression, hostility, resentment, loss of ambition, sleep disturbances, and physical symptoms. Marital problems may occur, especially in regard to money, child care, and housework responsibility. There may be neglect of self, suicidal actions and obsessions with death and self harm.

**Older Adults**—As with other adults, older adults may experience despair, mourning, apathy, withdrawal, anger, irritability, or confusion when family routines are disrupted by the disaster. Despair may accompany loss of property and objects, which is a loss of ties to the past. Older adults have more memories and memorabilia to lose. They may feel that it is too late to start over. Retirement savings may be spent out to repair homes. Frail, vulnerable elders may be at risk

of institutionalization if their homes are damaged beyond repair. Forced displacement can result in disorientation and depression.

## What can be done?

Although these reactions to natural disasters and stress are normal, they can create problems that cause more stress. Therefore, victims of disaster may want to try some of the following things to help alleviate stress.

- Actively and assertively seek competent information to solve problems as they arise. Don't hesitate to seek help and advice, whether it is for direct flood relief or for the emotional aftermath.
- Take "time off" from worries and home repairs by going to the movies, enjoying a favorite hobby, or relaxing. Take some time away from home to be with family or friends.
- Continue talking about your feelings and experiences. This "re-telling" decreases anxiety and establishes a connection with others.
- Couples need to devote time to their relationship. It is important to have time alone, to talk to each other and to have fun together. Don't take out anger on each other.
- Exercise, play a sport or enjoy other physical activity that is not disaster related. Exercise expends pentup frustrations and increases overall endurance.
- Attend to your health. Eat a healthy diet and get enough sleep. You'll increase your ability to deal with stress.
- You can lessen your feelings of helplessness and build "peace of mind" by preparing for future emergencies. Prepare emergency supplies and know neighborhood/ community resources.
- Listen to children. Children have a right to their feelings; feelings are normal.

Acknowledge feelings first, then provide simple and accurate information in response to their questions.

- Be aware that bad weather may make you and others edgy. Do something enjoyable on rainy days to begin replacing fears with more pleasant associations.
- Try to identify positive aspects of the flood: meeting neighbors for the first time, working together, developing community spirit.
- If problems persist, seek assistance from your local mental health professional, counselor, or member of clergy.

### **There is Hope**

At times it may seem that the problems and stress resulting from the flood will never end. However, continuing problems are not the only thing to anticipate. People, and the community as a whole, will move into the reconstruction phase—the rebuilding of our lives. With a lot of work and some time, the effects of the flood will grow more distant and there will be signs of continued caring and healing in the community. These signs include:

- Realizing that seeking help is a strength, not a weakness,
- People using available resources,
- People willing to listen to the stories of others,
- Town meetings helping a community understand its needs,
- Creating practical approaches to rebuilding, based on an understanding of limitations,
- Recognizing “hearts of gold and hands of hope.”

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