

A Flood of Emotions

Water is causing more than property damage in North Dakota. It is bringing a flood of emotions. How we deal with the emotional flood may affect how well North Dakotans recover from this natural disaster.

Emotional Responses

Most people are very quick to take care of what needs to be done: sandbagging, packing, helping neighbors. "Let's take care of what can be done." At the same time people experience disbelief: "This can't possibly be happening!" This emotional duality allows people to keep working for survival. But there may be a sense of unreality during the disaster.

Other powerful feelings may surface:

- panic/feeling out of control
- anger
- generosity toward others
- despair
- anxiety/uncertainty
- disorientation
- cooperation/teamwork

At times, flood preparations can pull whole neighborhoods together by working, sandbagging and preparing. There is a sense of teamwork. It can be an experience that helps people get to know each other in a special way.

The full force of the emotional flood will hit after the floodwaters recede. That's when exhaustion sets in. As people look at their real losses, they may experience grief, desperation and depression. People need to be prepared to pay more attention to their emotional reactions and to the reactions of friends and neighbors once the emergency crews go home.

Coping

One of first things people can do is pull together and don't hesitate to ask for assistance! Many people are around who want to help and will help. They just need to know what to do that will be most helpful right now.

Many neighbors are pulling together. Volunteers who are not experiencing flood danger are sandbagging low-lying areas. Yet some people try to manage by themselves, without accepting help. Help from others may make the critical difference between coping and suffering from a worse disaster.

Another important coping strategy is taking care of your physical and emotional needs. Eat a balanced diet to fuel your energy. As much as possible, get enough sleep. Fatigue will slow you down during an emergency. As you prepare, pack, sandbag or check your crops, talk with others about your feelings. Listen to theirs. Together, look for the positives in the situation.



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Talking Can Ease The Pain

Floodwaters will subside, but the emotional stress may keep rising for people who have experienced losses. Pain from loss and tough times can be eased when people keep talking with each other. Friends and neighbors, parents and children, and couples need to talk about what they are feeling.

When people stop talking with others who have suffered loss or who are facing financial trouble, they send the message that they don't care. Rather than feeling indifference, friends and neighbors may be caught up in their own losses, uncertainties and problems. Those who were not hurt directly by the floods may feel guilty and not know what to say.

Children especially need help in regaining a sense of security. They may see changes in their parents and think that they are somehow to blame for increased tension. Talking together and being honest yet reassuring about problems the family faces can help children feel more in control.

If money is tight, parents can ask children to help think of ways the family can work together to keep expenses down. Parents need to be sure children don't blame themselves for tough economic times.

Couples who are facing losses may find that each spouse copes differently with the stress. No one reaction is right. The important thing is to keep talking things over and to show love and affection toward each other.

What matters most as people put their lives back together is friends, neighbors and families making themselves available for each other.

It can be harder to be a good listener than to provide the immediate kinds of help that have brought neighbors and strangers together in the crisis. Keeping in touch with the people who are hurting doesn't mean you have to have the answers. Just giving someone a chance to talk about the problem can be an important step in rebuilding.

Source: Iowa State University

Helping Others

1. As much as possible, provide practical help during the flooding. Help friends or family pack. Furnish meals. Store their belongings; provide them with a place to stay. Parents may be very busy; offer to spend some time with children to play and to listen to their concerns.
2. Listen. When others talk about their experiences and feelings, their emotional load seems lighter to bear. One of the best ways you can help is to just listen. You don't have to come up with solutions or answers. It's OK if your neighbor needs to break down and cry. Others will ask, "Why me?" They are not really looking for an answer but expressing their hurt.
3. Show by words and actions that you care. A friendly arm around troubled shoulders or a few words of support and encouragement can help in times of crisis. Small, kind deeds and sincere expressions of affection or admiration also will mean a lot.

How Family Members Can Be More Supportive of One Another

Tell family members when they have done a good job. Laugh! Laughter can help relieve tension. Be considerate of other family members. Express love and concern often.

Neighboring in Times of Trouble

1. Offer specific types of help or ask how you can help.
2. Go ahead and act. Don't be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing.
3. Go ahead and help. Your friend won't resent you if you aren't facing flood danger yourself.
4. Keep helping. The danger may continue for some time. Recovering may take even longer. Your friends or family members will need regular, small acts of kindness to maintain their morale and to put their lives back together.

Adapted from Cooperative Extension Service, Kansas State University.

For emotional support, contact the Mental Health Association in North Dakota through the 24-hour statewide HELP-LINE at 1-800-472-2911.