



# helping an older family member cope after a natural disaster

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If you have an older family member who has been affected by a natural disaster -- such as a hurricane, a flood, a fire, or an earthquake -- the following suggestions may be useful to you and your family.

## Understanding how your older relative may be feeling

Following a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, your family member may experience symptoms such as these:

- Fear of being alone
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Sleeplessness
- Loss of appetite
- Withdrawing from family and friends

A natural disaster may also bring up memories of other traumas and therefore stir up strong feelings from the past. Your family member may be reacting not only to this event, but also to a tragedy that happened long ago.

### Ways to help

**If you can't get to your relative immediately, contact a neighbor or friend to reach out to him or her.** You could also alert local senior services and ask them to reach out to your relative.

**Make yourself available as much as possible.** Your relative may need help talking about and working through difficult feelings.

Try to make yourself available as much as possible -- by phone or by visiting -- to listen and talk. Make sure he or she has a cell phone with your number and other important numbers saved to the phone's contact list, and make sure he or she knows how to use it. Stay in touch often.

**Be aware that the older person may not show a reaction to the disaster for weeks or months.** The first response to a traumatic event is usually shock and denial. Stay alert for issues that may come up in the future that could be signs of a delayed reaction.

**Urge your family member to avoid relying on alcohol or medication in response to anxiety or sleeplessness.** If he or she does need medication, make sure the prescribing physician knows all the medications he's presently taking. Also, remind your relative not to take a friend's medication or to share medications with a friend and not to mix alcohol with his or her medications. Instead, suggest seeking comfort from friends, family members (including you), and possibly clergy.

**Feelings of helplessness are common after a traumatic event.** Being active in cleaning up, caring for others, or participating in rebuilding the community can give a sense of

control, purpose, and hope. If possible, try to help your older relative find ways to help others and get involved.

**Try to be patient if your family member asks the same questions or needs information again and again.** When people are stressed and their routines are interrupted, it's hard for them to absorb information, as their ability to concentrate is highly affected. You may need to repeat things.

**Encourage your family member to return to usual routines or to establish new ones.** Help your family member find resources in the area, such as a senior center, a gym, a place to walk, a coffee shop, or a faith community. Ask those in the community to reach out to your older relative as well.

**If a new or temporary living arrangement is needed, take the time to understand your options and involve the older person in the decision.** He or she may be more cooperative and will feel more respected if you include him or her in the decision-making process.

**Pictures of pets, family members and familiar music or TV shows can be comforting.** Watching repeated news coverage may cause unnecessary anxiety about safety.

If your older family member plans to move into your home, think carefully about issues like space, privacy, the availability of medical or social services in your area, whether your family will get along well, and how to accomplish a smooth transition for everyone. Make it clear to all whether this is a permanent or temporary situation.

Seek professional help if your older family member is experiencing any of the following symptoms for a prolonged period of time:

- Flashbacks and disturbing memories about what has happened
- Feelings of numbness or detachment
- Bad dreams or difficulty sleeping
- Feelings of profound sadness or grief
- Feelings of anxiety, fear, guilt, or powerlessness
- Feelings of anger and irritability
- Tiredness or fatigue
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Difficulty concentrating or forgetfulness
- Excessive crying
- Isolation or wanting to be alone more than usual

## **Employee Assistance and WorkLife Services**

As a reminder, if you or someone you love is struggling with stress, worry or anxiety related to this natural disaster, advisors with Chevron's Employee Assistance and WorkLife Services

program can help. Our licensed, professional mental health consultants can provide guidance, resources, and support. The service is confidential and is provided at no cost to you and your covered dependents. CTN 842-3333 or 925-842-3333.