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Response to the Stress of a Tornado What to Anticipate and What Can Be Done

Individuals and families who were directly or indirectly impacted by recent tornados in Indiana may experience immediate and/or long-term stress reactions. Individuals do not have to be directly impacted by the recent tornados to have reactions because in one way or another almost everyone in a community is affected by a tornado and becomes a victim in some way. It is also important to remember that everyone reacts differently to the trauma of a natural disaster and may also react on their individual timetable.

Some groups are more vulnerable to the trauma of a disaster than others. As compared to the general population, young children, adolescents and older adults are often subject to greater emotional and physical trauma. Individuals who have experienced other trauma or recent losses are also subject to greater emotional trauma. Specific responses will vary depending upon the individual, their past coping mechanisms, the amount of support they perceive they have and the phase of the post disaster period. While some reactions appear immediately, others may appear months later. Adults respond differently than children. Just because a child, adolescent or an older adult does not talk about the disaster does not mean they are not experiencing reactions. Opportunities must be repeatedly offered to them to talk about their experiences. For all age groups, the losses associated with the tornado may trigger memories or feelings associated with prior losses.

Children and Adolescents: Children are likely to experience a wide variety of emotional, behavioral and physical problems. They may have persistent fears about natural events, fears of future disasters, fears of leaving their parents and returning to school, and a loss of interest in school. They may experience problems with paying attention and remembering things. They may also exhibit behaviors that are common for a younger age period. Young children may tend to express the same fear or ask the same question over and over again. Adults need to be patient with this behavior and calmly respond with the same caring response each time. Adolescents may experience a disruption of their peer group activities and react negatively. They may also develop a negative outlook on the future and engage in risk taking behavior that was not common for them. Both children and adolescents may experience additional trauma as they watch media reports and hear about additional problems that may confront them and their families after the s (i.e. the danger of mold, illness, unsafe water, etc.)

Adults: Adults also can experience a wide variety of emotional, behavioral and physical reactions. In responding to a natural disaster like a tornado, many adults may experience anxiety, anger, resentment, irritability, loss of ambition, sleep disturbances, depression, difficulty making decisions, trouble concentrating or remembering things and various physical symptoms. Marital problems may occur, especially in regards to money, childcare and housework responsibilities. The added financial concerns and other stresses may also result in a change in parenting behaviors that in turn produce additional stress reactions in children and the family. There may be neglect of self, a sense of helplessness, and obsessions with death or self-harm.

Older Adults: Older adults may experience despair, mourning, indifference, withdrawal, anger, irritability, or confusion when family routines are disrupted by the disaster. Significant emotional reactions may occur with the loss of property and/or objects that represent a loss of ties to the past. Retirement savings may be spent to make repairs or to start over. If they are not allowed to return to their homes, the forced displacement may result in disorientation, confusion and depression. Older adults may also experience significant fear of dependency or of losing their self-sufficiency.

What Can Be Done:

The above reactions and other reactions are often experienced in response to a traumatic event. They can also create additional concerns that cause more stress. It is important to remember that everyone reacts differently to traumatic events. Some of the following may help to alleviate stress and to respond to behavioral and emotional concerns that result from a natural disaster:

1. Actively and assertively seek competent information to solve problems as they arise. Don't get caught up in reacting to rumors and false information. Don't hesitate to seek help and advice whether it is for direct tornado relief or for the emotional aftermath. Self-care, relationships and parenting are just as important to attend to as property loss.
2. Continue talking about your experiences and your reactions. This "re-telling" decreases anxiety and establishes a connection with others. Continue to give others, especially children and older adults an opportunity to continue talking, even if they have told you the same story and/or fears before.
3. Attend to your health and the health of your family. Eat a healthy diet and get enough sleep.
4. Return to family and daily routines as soon as possible. This is especially important for children to experience.
5. Listen to others, especially children, and avoid trying to comfort them by saying, "You shouldn't worry about that" or "You don't have to be afraid of that". In so doing, you discredit what they are feeling. Simply reflect back what they are saying to you to let them know you are listening to them. Acknowledge feelings first, then provide accurate information in response to questions. With young children you may need to give the same information numerous times.
6. 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.
7. Take "time off" from worries and home repairs to go to the movies, enjoy a favorite activity or just relax. Take time to spend with family and friends. Both families and couples need to devote time to their relationship. Couples need to have time alone, to talk and to have fun together. Don't take anger out on each other or your family. Exercise is important.
8. Try to identify "positive" aspects of the tornado (meeting neighbors for the first time, working together, developing community spirit, recognizing what is truly important in life, etc.).
9. If problems or concerns for yourself or family members persist, seek assistance from local mental health professionals, a counselor, physician, your child's school or the clergy. Remember that seeking assistance is a strength, not a weakness, and it can help prevent a concern from becoming even a larger concern.