

fact sheet

Human Recovery From Emergencies

Human recovery from emergencies is a long-term process, measured in years rather than weeks or months. Although most people get over the disaster event itself quite quickly, it can take a long time for life to return to normal and for them to come to terms with the changes to people, families, communities.

All people working in an emergency, no matter what their role, no matter what stage of their involvement, can aid human recovery by knowing about:

- Normal reactions to disaster;
- How to react to affected people;
- What is helpful;
- Who else is available to help;

Each worker's attitude is crucial in creating a caring community which is the essential basis of successful human recovery.

Recovery Principles

Recovery from emergencies means:

- Working for a new future, not trying to recapture the past
- Building upon history and tradition to connect the past, present and future
- Helping people to take charge of their lives, plan for and carry out their own recovery
- Providing information so needs are recognised and informed decisions can be made
- Promoting groups and networks, both preexisting and new, to enable effective communication, support and action to occur
- Coordinating and integrating all those involved in recovery so they can understand and assist each other.

The response and recovery systems are held together by communication of information which enables people to know what is needed, coordinate their activities and avoid creating additional problems.

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Community Response and Recovery

- When the emergency strikes, normal community systems and relationships are replaced by individual efforts. In the confusion and disorientation that follows, intense closeness develops as people help each other. Those not involved in this are felt to be outsiders and need to allow time to be accepted.
- After the crisis, differences and tensions emerge alongside recovery efforts. It can be a time of disappointment and conflict unless communication and coordination are emphasised.
- Pre-emergency local agencies and services need careful integration with the official response and recovery systems and with the informal recovery activities arising out of the community's own efforts. Otherwise further mini-disasters of conflict and misunderstanding may occur.
- During recovery, communities share feelings of support and encouragement. Cycles of enthusiasm, disillusionment, depression also occur. The community can come to feel isolated, forgotten, misunderstood as time passes.
- To ensure that programs support human recovery, all workers can: promote communication; provide information; clarify roles and responsibilities; understand the recovery system; not take expressions of emotion personally; encourage community initiative; support community activity.

Personal response and recovery

Although many people do not react adversely to disaster, most are affected at some stage of recovery. Any of the following normal stress responses to the abnormal events may be experienced:

Short term responses (First days to weeks):

Excitement, confusion, disorientation; changeable emotions; hard to think, plan, organise or remember things; numbness, reactions postponed until later or displaced onto other issues.

To help: Respect privacy and independence; offer help and support for people to work out what they need and how they can obtain it; allow time for planning and decisions; reach out, but offer suggestions not instructions or orders; provide information and repeat it often; involve affected people in recovery planning.

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Medium term responses (weeks to months):

Persisting emotions, numbness, nightmares or preoccupations with the event; grief, anger and other reactions to the emergency's accumulating impacts; uncertainty, worry about the future; feeling helplessness, dependency, pessimism, distrust and disillusionment; exhaustion, no leisure or relaxation; health problems, accidents, changes in eating, drinking, smoking, sex or other habits; chronic stress; neglecting one's own needs; over sensitivity to political or community events; wanting to blame.

To help: Let people talk themselves out as often as they need; don't take expressions of emotion personally; foster group support; convey understanding and concern; show willingness to help with small things that may be important symbols; provide information repeatedly on normal reactions, recovery operations and help available; reach out to help but foster independence.

Long term responses (months to years):

Delayed reactions may include: any short or medium term responses; changes in attitude, values, lifestyle, habits; loss of leisure and recreational interests; changes in friendship networks, isolation, preoccupation with disaster or recovery incidents; continuing pessimism, bitterness, resentment, distrust, unhappiness; marital, family or relationship problems; behaviour problems in children; changed work attitudes and motivation.

To help: Education about long term reactions in the early stages of recovery helps them develop long-term support systems; encourage use of community health, education, welfare and leisure facilities; support religious and cultural symbols of recovery; encourage people to look after themselves.

The recovery system

Recovery requires the coordinated efforts of many agencies and individuals at different times. The recovery system is the symbol of recovery for those affected by the emergency - its problems and deficiencies can affect its clients, compounding disaster.

All contacts with affected people give opportunities to help by:

- listening to what people say even if not related to the job at hand;
- understanding the whole recovery system; providing information to people about resources and services;
- maintaining attitudes of respect, care and concern;
- supporting initiative;
- avoiding pity or being patronising; and
- encouraging dependency.

For further advice contact Lifeline 13 11 14 or Canberra Connect on 13 22 81