



# GUIDE TO RECOVERY: SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING FOLLOWING A DISASTER

## TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF AND OTHERS

You've been through a lot. Don't expect just to take it in stride. It is usual to feel helpless, confused, angry or worried.

It is normal to experience conflicting emotions. Allowing yourself to admit your feelings and expressing them to someone you trust will help you to cope. Try to anticipate what conditions you may be confronted with and how you may react. Thinking through this will help you feel more in control of the situation and less distressed.

### Some of the feelings you may experience include:

- Relief that you can start to get your home, and life back in order.
- Uncertainty about what it may be like in the coming days, weeks and months.
- Distress about the losses you have experienced.
- Relief at what did survive and remain after the event.
- Upset about the changes you have to deal with.
- Enthusiasm and motivation to begin to rebuild.
- Overwhelmed and worried about how your going to get through it all – the hard work ahead, and the disruption to your daily life and the impacts on the surrounding community.
- Replaying of the frightening moments of the approaching disaster.
- Hope for the future.

### What you can do:

- Identify the feelings and thoughts. Notice them, and label them. Are you feeling anxious, angry or sad?
- Some individuals notice feelings of worry or distress and may experience having a tight chest, gritted teeth, tense jaw, butterflies in their stomach, heart palpitations, sweaty palms, or shortness of breath.
- Recognise what these feelings and sensations are by putting them into words and speaking to someone you trust.
- The next step is to find ways of managing your feelings. These are some useful techniques that you may find helpful.



### **If you are feeling anxious or upset, try to:**

- Slow down your breathing.
- Challenge the negative thoughts and replace them with helpful ones.
- Only do what you can and take small steps.
- Try not to take anger out on others.
- Be patient with yourself and those close to you– it takes time to manage feelings. You and those around you are taking this journey together.

### **There are practical things that also will help you to manage:**

- Avoid isolation. Individuals who seek out support, involve themselves in their community, and use the services available recover faster and better.
- Get enough rest. Sleep as much as your body needs for a few days.
- Stay hydrated, eat nutritiously and regularly.
- Whenever possible, take time away to do something that you find enjoyable.
- Get as much realistic physical activity as possible.
- Accept help from others.
- Find a support network.
- Keep a record of your thoughts and feelings.
- Give someone a hug. Physical touch is important to feel connected.
- Make plans for the future.

## **TAKING CARE OF CHILDREN**

Children have many different types of reactions to disaster and evacuation. They may be coping well. They may become clingy or fearful, have aches and pains, have nightmares, or revert to thumb-sucking and bed-wetting. They may fight more with their siblings. Or they may try to act brave when they really need reassurance. All these responses are expected.

### **Words of encouragement:**

- No one knows your children as well as you do
- Family is the most important support network for children
- Getting help early can be a good idea



### **Here are some things that may be helpful as you help your children to cope:**

- Continue to love and support your child/children encourage them to talk about their feelings, fears, and experiences. Listen to them. Admit that you also feel sad, afraid, worried, but that you will be there and will work it out together.
- Provide your children age-appropriate but factual information about what happened. When the time is right, discuss how to prevent emergencies with them, including what they can do to help in keeping the family and pets safe.

- Provide reassurance to your children that the family is safe. Repeat this as often as possible!
- Keep close to them, and hold them. Touch provides extra reassurance that someone is there for them. Spend extra time with them at bedtime.
- Be tolerant of regressive behaviour. It is usually temporary.
- Allow your children to help by giving them jobs to do, even if it slows you down or even if you will have to do the job over again later. Praise them for what they accomplished.
- Return to a normal schedule, but relax rules for a while.
- Work with family, teachers, childcare providers, babysitters, and others who will need to understand how the emergency has affected your children.

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Emergencies and disasters can be particularly difficult for those with special needs, and their caregivers.

Access to health services such as your family doctor, pharmacy, physiotherapist and other health support services (i.e., home care) may be limited, sporadic or not available at all. Your usual ways of getting groceries, medications, and medical supplies may be disrupted. If you require these services, make a plan to ensure you have everything you need.

- Ensure you have an adequate amount of your prescription medication and any over the counter medication you require as access to your pharmacist or physician may be delayed. A visit to a walk-in clinic or Care Centre in the area you are staying currently may be required to acquire a prescription to ensure you have adequate quantities of any medications you require.
- Ensure you have an adequate supply (minimum of two weeks) of any health supplies you need, i.e. incontinence products, wound care supplies, barrier creams etc. Access to these products may be limited or certain products not available.
- The social supports that were previously available to you, such as social programs, community centre activities or even other friends/neighbours who provided social support, may not be available immediately or may be limited. Be aware of how to access social supports, even remotely through telephone assurance, to reduce feelings of social isolation.

### **Considerations for People with Dementia and their Caregivers:**

For many people with Alzheimer's or other dementias, changes in routine can be extremely upsetting resulting in new or increased challenging behaviors, angry outbursts, increase in wandering frequency, disruption in sleeping, eating and toileting patterns. When you return home it is important to remember that for the person with Alzheimer's and/or other dementias there may be lingering effects. Landmarks may be changed, home may look, feel and smell different. Routines may be new or old routines renewed, both resulting in the potential to disorient. Re-establish a routine as soon as possible; reassurance and distraction when agitated will help to make the person feel safe and comforted.

# MOVING BEYOND

The recovery period can often feel overwhelming, lonely and difficult.

## Some people find it helpful to:

- Get back into a routine. It will probably look different from the one you had pre-disaster, but familiar patterns of mealtimes (with familiar food), school or work, and bedtimes are important for adults as well as children.
- Break tasks into small steps that are manageable and can be accomplished. Work through them one at a time.
- Think about what you have achieved at the end of each day.



Individuals often find themselves reliving their experience of the disaster and evacuation, thinking about it, trying to put some sense of order into the events, and answering the question of “why?” It’s natural to try to understand what has happened, but it’s important to also recognize that many things that occurred were outside of your control.

If you continue to feel overwhelmed, can’t shake the feelings of despair or have any of the following signs, seek help through your family doctor, clergy or a community organization. Asking for help is a sign of strength.

- Frequent arguments or short temper
- Increased consumption of alcohol or drugs
- Difficulty sleeping, bad dreams
- Depression
- Panic attacks or general anxiety

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Kids Help Phone:** 1-800-668-6868

**Canadian Mental Health Association:** For links to support and resources in your area.

**Public Health Agency of Canada:** For additional supportive resources and links to your provincial and territorial health ministry.

**Canadian Psychological Association**

**Public Safety Canada:** For more information and links to provincial and territorial emergency management.

**Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention:** For links to crisis centres in your province or territory.