COPING WITH STRESS IN A DISASTER

Stress after a disaster is common, and SAMHSA says most symptoms fade in a fairly short time. CDC's steps are to look after your body, stay connected, take breaks from the news, and ask for help. SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline answers calls and texts 24/7 at 1-800-985-5990.

Reviewed October 30, 2026

Fear, worry, and trouble sleeping are normal reactions to a disaster. CDC says taking care of your emotional health will help you think clearly and react to urgent needs to protect yourself and your loved ones, whether you are sheltering from fallout or a week into an outage. SAMHSA says most stress symptoms are temporary, but for some people they may last for weeks or even months.

DO THIS

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org (CDC). For distress related to a disaster, call or text the Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 (SAMHSA).

RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF STRESS

Use this in the days and weeks after an event, to notice when you or someone in your household is struggling.

1. Check feelings: fear, anger, sadness, worry, numbness, or frustration (CDC).
2. Check the body: changes in appetite, energy, and activity; trouble sleeping or nightmares; headaches, body pains, stomach problems, or skin rashes; and chronic health problems getting worse (CDC).
3. Check thinking: difficulty concentrating and making decisions (CDC).
4. Check habits: more use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs (CDC).
5. Check how the person is with others. SAMHSA adds pulling away from people and things, feeling helpless or hopeless, feeling like you have to keep busy, and worrying a lot of the time.

Check: CDC says to seek help from your health care provider if these reactions interfere with your daily activities for several days in a row.

> **WARNING**
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> SAMHSA lists “thinking of hurting or killing yourself or someone else” among the warning signs (SAMHSA). Do not wait: call or text 988.

KEEPING A DAILY ROUTINE

Use this during a long outage or a shelter period, to keep your body and mind steady.

1. Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day. CDC says adults need 7 or more hours of sleep a night.
2. Try to eat healthy meals with what you have (CDC).
3. Move every day. CDC says every little bit of physical activity helps, and suggests breaking it into smaller amounts such as 20 to 30 minutes a day.
4. Avoid alcohol and other drugs (CDC).
5. Make time to unwind. CDC suggests deep breaths, stretching, meditating, keeping a journal, and returning to activities you enjoy.

Check: at the end of the day you can say when you slept, what you ate, how you moved, and when you rested.

LIMITING NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Use this when coverage keeps you upset, but you still need instructions from officials.

1. Get your updates from reliable officials (CDC). In a radiation emergency, keep listening for official instructions: see emergency radio and alerts.
2. Take breaks from news and social media. CDC says it is good to be informed, but constant information about negative events can be upsetting.
3. Avoid excessive exposure to media coverage of the event (CDC).
4. Limit children’s exposure to coverage. CDC says children who were directly exposed to a disaster can become upset again when they see or hear reminders.

Check: you know which official source you rely on for instructions, and the coverage is off the rest of the time.

HELPING CHILDREN COPE

Use this with children of any age after a disaster. CDC says disaster stress can be harder for children because they understand less about the situation, feel less able to control events, and may not be able to put their feelings into words. Some react right away and some react later. Younger children may cry more, want to be held, return to behaviors they had outgrown such as bed-wetting, or fear being separated from you. Older children and teens may be afraid it will happen again, have trouble sleeping, pull away from friends, or act out.

Steps from CDC:

1. Give your child chances to talk about what they went through, and ask what they think about it.
2. Encourage questions. Answer them truthfully, in words they understand, and correct any misinformation.
3. Share age-appropriate information and reassure them (CDC).
4. Return to your normal daily routine and help your child do the same. CDC says eating meals as a family or returning to school can help reduce stress.
5. If routines have to change, talk about the changes and how long they will last.
6. Limit your child's exposure to media coverage of the disaster.
7. Set an example by taking care of yourself: eating well, exercising, sleeping, and avoiding alcohol and drugs.
8. Tell your child's teachers or childcare staff how your child is coping.

Check: CDC says to consider talking to a pediatrician, school counselor, or child psychologist if your child stays anxious, fearful, sad, or angry for more than two to four weeks, if problems get worse instead of better, or if reactions affect schoolwork or relationships for a long time.

CHECKING ON OTHERS

Use this for neighbors, older relatives, and friends in the days after an event.

1. Reach out and talk. CDC says to share your feelings with a friend or family member, maintain relationships, and rely on your support system.
2. Watch for the warning signs in recognizing signs of stress above.
3. Connect people with community-based or faith-based organizations (CDC).
4. Offer the Disaster Distress Helpline. SAMHSA says you may call for yourself or on behalf of someone else.
5. For practical needs, SAMHSA says to call 211 for information about evacuations, shelters, food and clothing distribution, and other resources.

Check: you have a short list of people you will check on, and their numbers are on your printed contact list.

CALLING THE DISASTER DISTRESS HELPLINE

Use this when disaster-related distress feels like too much, for you or for someone else. SAMHSA describes the helpline as a toll-free, multilingual crisis support service, available 24/7, year-round, to anyone in the US and its territories experiencing emotional distress related to a natural or human-caused disaster.

1. Call or text 1-800-985-5990.
2. For Spanish, call or text 1-800-985-5990 and press “2.”
3. If you are Deaf or hard of hearing and use ASL, text or call 1-800-985-5990 using your preferred relay provider.
4. For another language, tell the counselor your preferred language. SAMHSA says counselors can connect callers to interpreters in over 100 languages.
5. Talk with the counselor. SAMHSA says counselors listen without judgment, provide crisis counseling, and can refer you to local crisis call centers for follow-up.

You do not need to give any identifying information. Standard text and data rates apply when texting from a mobile phone.

Check: the number is saved in every household phone and written on your paper contact list.

PRACTICE LIST

SKILLS

- ☐ Recognizing signs of stress
- ☐ Keeping a daily routine: sleep, food, movement, rest
- ☐ Limiting news and social media to official updates
- ☐ Helping children cope: talk, routines, less coverage
- ☐ Checking on others: names and numbers listed
- ☐ Disaster Distress Helpline (1-800-985-5990) saved in every phone

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COMPILED FROM THESE SOURCES

1. CDC, Coping with a Disaster or Traumatic Event (PDF)
2. CDC, Managing Stress
3. CDC, Helping Children Cope with a Disaster
4. SAMHSA, Disaster Distress Helpline
5. SAMHSA, Warning Signs and Risk Factors for Emotional Distress

Every safety claim on this sheet links to its primary source.