

# Utah Disaster Crisis Counselor

October 2023 Newsletter



# Disasters come in many shapes and sizes

We've all seen and read the news stories about the wildfire in Maui, the hurricanes impacting California, Texas, and Florida, the earthquake in Morocco, and the devastation from the flooding in Libya. We've also heard about local disasters such as the floods from torrential rain in Utah. Disasters, whether natural or human-caused, and other incidents of mass trauma, affect thousands of people each year. Many individuals "bounce back" with help from family and friends, but others may need more support to cope and move forward on a path of recovery. Utah has developed a group of certified disaster crisis counselors to provide psychoeducation and other interventions to help those affected by disasters. Learn more about this certification by visiting <https://sumh.utah.gov/education/certification/disaster-response-counseling>.

## Know the warning signs/risk factors for emotional distress

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration has developed a [web page](#) that offers information on the warning signs of emotional distress. This information was taken from their site.

It is common for individuals to feel stress symptoms following a disaster. Whether natural or human-caused, disasters can have a devastating impact on people's lives. Everyone who sees or experiences a disaster can be affected in some way. Warning signs of emotional distress may differ in children and teens than in adults or even older adults. These are some of the common warning signs of emotional distress:

- Eating or sleeping too much or too little
- Pulling away from people and things
- Having low or no energy
- Having unexplained aches and pains such as stomachaches/headaches
- Feelings helpless or hopeless
- Excessive smoking, drinking, or using drugs (including prescription medication)
- Worrying a lot of the time, feeling guilty but not sure why
- Thinking of hurting or killing yourself or someone else
- Having difficulty readjusting to home or work life

If you suspect your loved one is experiencing emotional distress, reaching out is the first step to providing the help they need to recover. Respond calmly, listen, acknowledge feelings, and support simple problem solving and planning of next steps. If needed, link them to additional resources.

# Disaster memorial dates and activating event

The memorial date of a disaster or tragic event can renew feelings of fear, anxiety, and sadness in disaster survivors. Certain smells or sounds, such as smoke or wind, can also activate emotional distress. These and other environmental sensations can take people right back to the event or cause them to fear that it's about to happen again. These "activating events" are not always associated with a particular day on the calendar and can happen at any time. Also, special occasions like birthdays or holidays can also be difficult for families who have been displaced from their homes due to a disaster. It's hard to celebrate if you're facing financial difficulties or living in temporary housing. Some people may start anticipating the memorial days, weeks, or even months before they occur. It's normal to have fears and concerns about how that day will make you feel.

The following coping tips can help you or a loved one cope with renewed stress as when memorial dates approach or when activating events suddenly occur.

- ❑ Be aware that special days may be difficult.
- ❑ Be gentle with yourself. It's okay to have feelings and recognize that these emotions are normal.
- ❑ Participate in activities that you enjoy. Sing, meditate, attend a spiritual service, go to the movies, or get together with a loved one for lunch/dinner.
- ❑ Talk about your losses if you need to. Share your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust.
- ❑ Draw on your faith/spirituality. For many, faith or other spiritual beliefs are a source of strength and comfort every day, and most especially during difficult times.
- ❑ Accept kindness and help from others. It's often hard for people to accept help because they don't want to burden anyone or appear weak. Allow people in your life to show their care and concern.
- ❑ For some, helping others by volunteering is a healthy way to heal. Some activities can be as simple as donating food, clothing, and other items.

Find more tips for coping at <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/coping-tips>.

## Put together a "go" bag

You can reduce fear, anxiety, and losses that accompany disasters through some simple preparation. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Red Cross say everyone should have an emergency go bag ready. Emergencies are more common than you may think and it's important to start building your emergency kit and keep it nearby, such as in your garage or closet. Start a step at a time. Buy one item to get started or create a full list of items you need in your go bag and buy them all at

once. FEMA emphasizes that everybody will have a different list because everybody's needs are different. No matter how you choose to build your go bag, the Red Cross suggests a go bag should have enough items in it for your entire family for three days. Start preparing and gathering your go bag items today. Suggestions include:

- Water: 1 gallon per person, per day
- Food: nonperishable, easy to prepare
- First aid kit
- Medications (7-day supply)
- Flashlight with batteries; battery-operated or crank radio
- Alternate power source to charge your cell phone (emergency phone bank)
- Clothes and sturdy shoes
- Personal items and toiletries (eyeglasses, toothbrush, toilet paper)
- Copies of personal documents (medical lists and pertinent medical information, proof of address, deed/lease to home, passports, birth certificates, insurance policies)
- Family and emergency contact information
- Don't forget your pet's needs (food, water, medication)

