



A Flood... Of Emotions



Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service

Rising water is causing more than property damage in Kansas. It is bringing a flood of emotions. How we deal with the emotional flood may affect how well Kansans recover from this natural disaster.

Emotional Responses

“There are two reactions during a disaster,” explains Charlie Griffin, Extension Specialist, Rural Family Support. “I think most people are very quick to take care of what needs to be done: sandbagging, packing, helping neighbors. ‘Let’s take care of what can be done. ‘At the same time people experience disbelief. ‘This can’t possibly be happening!... This emotional duality allows people to keep working for survival. But there may be a sense of unreality during the disaster.

Other powerful feelings may surface:

- panic/feeling out of control
- anger
- generosity toward others
- despair
- anxiety/uncertainty
- disorientation
- cooperation/team work

“At times, flood preparations have been wonderful,” comments Elaine Johannes. Director of the Extension Rural Mental Health Project, Johannes lives in a flood-threatened section of Manhattan. “Our whole neighborhood has been working together, sandbagging and preparing. There is a sense of team work. We’re getting to know each other in a special way.”

Griffin suggests that the full force of the emotional flood will hit after the flood water recede. “That’s when exhaustion sets in,” he reports. “As we look at our real losses, we may experience grief, desperation and depression. We

need to be prepared to pay more attention to our emotional reactions and to the reactions of our friends and neighbors once the emergency crews go home.

Coping

One of first things people can do is pull together. “Don’t hesitate to ask for assistance!” Griffin suggests. “There are many people around who want to help and will help. They just need to know what to do that will be the most help right now.”

Many neighbors are pulling together. Volunteers who are not experiencing flood danger are sandbagging low-lying areas. Yet some people try to manage by themselves, without accepting help.

Griffin continues, “Help from others may make the critical difference between coping and suffering from a worse disaster.”

Another important coping strategy is taking care of your physical and emotional needs. Eat a balanced diet to fuel your energy. As much as possible, get enough sleep. Fatigue will slow you down during an emergency. As you prepare, pack, sandbag or check your crops, talk with others about your feelings. Listen to theirs. Together, look for the positives in the situation.

How Family Members Can Be More Supportive of One Another

- **Tell family members when they have done a good job.**
- **Laugh! Laughter can help relieve tension.**
- **Be considerate of other family members.**
- **Express love and concern often.**

Helping Others

1 As much as possible, provide practical help during the flooding. Help friends or family pack. Furnish meals. Store their belongings; provide them with a place to stay. Parents may be very busy; offer to spend some time with children to play and to listen to their concerns.

2 Listen. When others talk about their experiences and feelings, their emotional load seems lighter to bear. One of the best ways you can help is to just listen. You don't have to come up with solutions or answers. It's okay if your neighbor needs to break down and cry. Others will ask "Why me?" They are not really looking for an answer but expressing their hurt.

3 Show by words and actions that you care. A friendly arm around troubled shoulders or a few words of support and encouragement can help in times of crisis. Small, kind deeds and sincere expressions of affection or admiration also will mean a lot.

About Children

Flooding or water damage to crops brings stress to the whole family-including the children. Such crises can be extremely threatening for them. These tips can help you help your child cope during disaster.

- Heed public safety warnings. Quick actions may avert many difficulties for the whole family.
- Tell children what's going on simply and matter-of-factly. This helps avoid the fear of the unknown.
- Listen. Answer their questions as much as you can.
- Reassure them. Use statements like "It's scary right now, but we'll always take care of you."

- Involve children. Let them help pack or fill their own sandbag. This helps them feel a part of the family and prepares them for later situations.
- As much as possible, keep routines. They help children feel secure.
- Show love and support.
- Make sure children know the family's difficulties are not their fault. Children tend to blame themselves for problems.
- Keep your sense of humor and enjoy a good laugh together frequently.
- Take care of your own emotions and stress. Children will reflect your anxiety or your calm.

During crises, children may act younger than they are. A child may be irritable or misbehave. This is normal for a child who is scared and doesn't understand a situation as serious as flooding or crop loss. Children need your extra patience at this time and small actions they can take to help the family.

"Neighboring" In Times of Trouble

- 1. Offer specific types of help or ask how you can help.**
- 2. Go ahead and act. Don't be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing.**
- 3. Go ahead and help. Your friend won't resent you if you aren't facing flood danger yourself.**
- 4. Keep helping. The danger may continue for some time. Recovering may take even longer. Your friends or family members will need regular, small acts of kindness to maintain their morale and to put their lives back together.**

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