

# After the Storm: Comforting Friends and Family



After the winds calm, the rains stop, and the waters recede, the human loss from a natural disaster is obvious. Homes can be damaged or destroyed, crops destroyed, jobs lost, and people killed.

Disaster survivors must grieve their losses. Many of your fellow citizens are grieving for loved ones, but they also are grieving for lost homes, belongings, jobs, crops, businesses, pets, and many other things. In short, many survivors are grieving for their lost way of life.

Most of us want to help, but what can we do in this time of crisis? Family, friends, and neighbors can help survivors cope. Following are several things you can do to help:

**Touch.** A loving touch creates an instant connection. Touch is reassuring, and it offers comfort. For many individuals, touch is the preferred method of expressing their feelings. A hand on the arm or shoulder, or even a hug, can make a world of difference to a survivor.

**Listen.** Listen with an open ear to everything the survivor says. Victims need to tell their story, particularly concerning the loss of a loved one. Do not tell the person not to talk about their lost loved one. The person needs to talk about the one who is gone. Talking about a person keeps them alive to the survivor. It also helps them work through their grief. Do not worry if tears fall while they tell their story—this is OK. Do not tell them not to cry. If the person is unable to talk about his or her loss, look for nonverbal cues and use your intuition. Sometimes the person will just want to “vent.” All you need to do is listen.

**Be There.** Sometimes the person will just need to be silent. Silence is restful, and it brings peace. Your presence can be as supportive as conversation. Sometimes words are not necessary.

**Accept Feelings.** Accept the person’s feelings. Don’t discount or ignore them. After a major disaster, people will feel a wide range of emotions. They will experience the joy and happiness of survival. They will experience rage at the things they have lost. Never say that the person should not be feeling hopeless or angry, because disaster brings a roller coaster of emotions. It is normal for them to be very edgy, nervous, and short-tempered. Remember, feelings pass, but being understood and accepted endures in one’s memory. All you need to do is listen.

Some people may feel alone, and they blame their loved one for leaving them. Other people may blame themselves. Survivors may feel guilty because they lived and their loved ones died. During any disaster, part of the grief process can be wondering, “How can I go on in the midst of all this tragedy?” You may not need to give an answer; you may just need to let the person cry, talk, or rage. Yes, victims will rage because they often are angry. The anger reflects a feeling of loss of control over their world, their home, their business, and their life. Anger is a very normal emotion associated with a disaster. Do not feel that the anger is directed at you. The anger is aimed at the situation and the frustrations that develop from the situation.

Be very aware that each survivor’s personal experiences during the disaster can affect his or her recovery. The degree of contact with the event makes a differ-



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ence. For example, those who “rode out” the storm could have deeper emotional scars than those who evacuated to safety. The time an individual spends in the disaster and aftermath will impact that person’s emotions. If you notice a victim experiencing nightmares, flashbacks, emotional numbing, and exaggerated startle responses for an extended period of time, professional help should be recommended.

Here are some guidelines to help you help your loved ones or friends after a disaster:

**Be Yourself.** It is OK if you do not know what to say or do. It is OK if you feel awkward or nervous. What is important is that you are doing your best to help your friends, family, and neighbors. You can provide encouragement and help your loved ones understand that they can find a “new normal.” No, things will not be the way they were, but they can go on with their lives. Developing a routine, such as getting the children back in school, will help the grieving process.

**Keep Confidences.** If, in your conversations, you learn things that are personal in nature, do not repeat them. Under most conditions, you should not violate your friend’s trust or your own integrity. There are exceptions to this rule, however, such as suicidal statements. You want your friends and family to feel it is safe to open up to you when they are ready. But also understand you can encourage your friend to get help if you think that is necessary. Depression is a very common result of a disaster. Sometimes friends need encouragement to go further and seek professional help.

**Express Friendship by Doing Something.** As it is appropriate, express your love and friendship. Do not ask if you can do something; just do it. Do not ask, “Do you need anything?” They may be so numb they cannot think. It is better to suggest specifics: “Do you need cleaning or kitchen items?” People who have lost everything need everything, but they may be too bewildered to say so. In addition, you may take a meal, do laundry, or help clean up property. You may take a flower to plant for the new house. You need to let your friends know they are loved and that you are willing to do whatever you can to help them regain

their lives. For some people, actions are the best way to express emotions.

**Don’t Push Away the Tears.** Allow your loved one to cry. Also allow yourself to cry. People can weep together, and find comfort in the sharing. Tears are a way to decrease the stress associated with any loss. Bringing small boxes of tissue is a thoughtful gesture at this time.

**Encourage Spirituality.** Spirituality can be very important. If spirituality is a part of their lives, encourage survivors to draw on that inner resource. Activities such as prayer, meditation, and inspirational reading can bring a welcome measure of peace during any troubled times.

**Laugh Together.** Humor is another way individuals can reduce stress. Humor can be a very important aspect of the healing process. Evacuees from Hurricane Katrina expressed the importance of being able to laugh together to get away from the stresses in their lives. Laughter can be very good medicine.

Families will always miss the people and things they have lost in the disaster. They can, however, build new lives, and you are a very important part of that recovery.

Additional Reading:  
*Is There Anything I Can Do? Helping a Friend When Times Are Rough* by Sol Gordon

Adapted from the following publications: *GriefWork: Guides for Survival and Growth* and *Expressing Kindness in Times of Illness and Death* by Sam Quick, Ph.D., and Betsy Spalding, R.N., B.S.N., The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service; *Triumph Over Tragedy: A Community Response to Managing Trauma in Times of Disaster and Terrorism* (Second Edition), edited by Garret D. Evans and Brenda A. Wiens and prepared by the University of Florida National Rural Behavioral Health Center; *How Families and Neighbors Can Help One Another Cope* by North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Service; *Dealing with Stress After a Disaster* by North Dakota State University Extension Service; and *Establishment and operation of shelters serving socially vulnerable populations: A socio-spatial analysis* by Lynn Pike, Ph.D., Mississippi State University.

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