Mental Health Effects of a Natural Disaster Can Be Long Lasting

The physical, emotional and mental effects of surviving a natural disaster can be long-lasting, according to the experts at Montgomery County Alcohol, Drug Addiction & Mental Health Services (ADAMHS). Symptoms of distress may appear after a tornado or severe storm and may manifest in the days, weeks, months, or even years after the disaster occurs.

“A disaster survivor can experience fear, anxiety, have trouble sleeping, irritability, feel helpless and overwhelmed, or even have nightmares related to the tornado or severe storm,” said ADAMHS Executive Director Helen Jones-Kelley. “The person may even smoke or drink more and withdraw from others. If significant problems persist longer than a month, it’s possible the disaster survivor has developed post-traumatic stress (PTS).”

If you need assistance, please call Samaritan CrisisCare at 937.224.4646.

There are several steps you can take to help restore emotional well-being and a sense of control following a natural disaster, including the following:

• **Give yourself time to adjust.** Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced and exercise caution when making major life decisions.

• **Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress.** Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can suppress your feelings rather than help you manage and lessen your distress. In addition, alcohol and drugs may intensify your emotional or physical pain. Seek support from people who care about you.

• **Find local support groups that often are available for those who have suffered from natural disasters.** These can be especially helpful for people with limited personal support systems. Try to find groups led by appropriately trained and experienced professionals such as psychologists. Group discussion can help people realize that other individuals in the same circumstances often have similar reactions and emotions.

• **Establish or re-establish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program.** This can be especially important when the normal routines of daily life are disrupted. Even if you are in a shelter and unable to return home, establish routines that can bring comfort. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.

• **Help those you can.** Helping others, even during your own time of distress, can give you a sense of control and can make you feel better about yourself.
Montgomery County Alcohol, Drug Addiction & Mental Health Services is responsible for the planning, funding and monitoring of public mental health and alcohol and other drug addiction services. Under Ohio law, ADAMHS is the local county entity with responsibility for coordinating the public behavioral health system in Montgomery County. ADAMHS collaborates on the strategic initiatives of the Board of County Commissioners and supports the professional development needs of local governmental departments as well as approximately 30+ community-based organizations.

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