



WHEN DISASTER STRIKES...

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The destructive, devastating forces of nature seem to be causing chaos more and more nowadays. The real-time visuals on the news and social media have focused the pain and the horror and the daunting possibility that this could indeed happen to anyone at any time.

According to the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, during the 20-year period spanning 1994 to 2013, 6 873 natural disasters worldwide claimed 1.35 million lives (68 000 lives on average per year) and affected 218 million people on average per annum. Instead of adopting a fatalistic or indifferent attitude, we should consider the probability of being a survivor of a disaster and prepare ourselves, our families and our communities, to reduce

the risk and enhance our chances of survival. While disasters are unexpected and unpredictable, that time-tested Boy Scout motto of 'being prepared' may save our lives and the lives of our loved ones. Our aim in this article is to raise awareness on personal health and safety before, during and after disaster strikes. There are many things one can pro-actively consider to mitigate the impact of a disaster.

Preparing for an earthquake

The real key to surviving an earthquake and reducing your risk of injury lies in planning, preparing, and practicing what you and your family will do if it happens, to learn to react reflexively. During an earthquake, most deaths and injuries are caused by collapsing building materials and heavy falling objects. Identify the safe spots in each room of your home and practice drills to mobilise to these locations as an earthquake begins. During your earthquake drill, drop down onto your hands and knees, cover at least your head and neck under some shelter, trying to stay clear of windows or glass that could shatter or objects that could fall on you.

Plan and practice evacuation, and make sure everyone in the family/workplace is well aware of the plan. Consider alternative exits for each room and prepare any special equipment (i.e. rope ladders, crow bars, etc).

Once you've made your plans, the most critical consideration is how you implement them. I.e. what you need is the ability to communicate. Make sure you

keep your phones charged, and that you have spare, charged batteries, so you can call the organisations on whose support you will rely, and inform others of your whereabouts and intentions.

Stock up on emergency supplies, and then make sure everyone knows where your emergency food, water, first aid kits, torches, survival kits (car and home) and fire extinguishers are located. Supplies should be sufficient to last three days.

On floor-plan sketches, pinpoint where utility switches or valves (gas, electricity, water) are found so that they can be turned off, if possible, and indicate the location of your emergency outdoor meeting place.

Take time before an earthquake, or any disaster for that matter, to write an emergency priority list, which should identify important items to be hand-carried, and those to be removed by car or truck if one is available. This should include significant documents, personal medications, etc. If time permits, make sure everyone locks doors and windows, and turns off the utilities.



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Make a list of important information and put it in a secure location, including:



Emergency telephone numbers



Important **medical information**, such as allergies, regular medications, etc.



The names, addresses, and telephone numbers of **your insurance agents**, including policy types and numbers



The **vehicle identification number, year, model, and license number** of your automobile, etc.



The telephone numbers of the **electric, gas, and water companies**



Your **bank's telephone number, account types, and numbers**



The names and telephone numbers of **neighbours or landlord**



Radio and television broadcast stations to tune in to for emergency broadcast information

After an earthquake, do not use matches, lighters, or appliances, and do not operate light switches until you are sure there are no gas leaks. Sparks from electrical switches could pose a shock or fire hazard, igniting gas causing an explosion.

If you smell gas, or if you notice a large consumption of gas being registered on the gas meter, shut off the gas immediately. Electricity and water supply should also be shut off after a major disaster.

In the overwhelming aftermath of a disaster, there is increased risk of drowning and contracting waterborne diseases due to new and/or excess bacteria, mosquitoes and parasites.

Gastrointestinal problems may develop due to water contamination.

Access to rescue and specialised care may be delayed, so survivors need to organise and implement practical precautions to

reduce risk of further injury and disease. Ensure everyone can swim, and identify potential flotation devices. If you sustain any cut or laceration, try to clean the wound and keep it dry, away from potentially contaminated water. With the likely increase of mosquitoes, repellent should be available.

In some cases, authorities might warn the public of an imminent disaster, which may allow some preparation time. However, a plan should be in place to prioritise actions, to reduce panic, and to enhance safety and survival.

Practical aspects are not the only consideration – self-care after a disaster is extremely important. Disasters are traumatic events and can result in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems.



SAFETY IN A DISASTER AREA

Here are some more practical ideas to keep safe in the wake of a disaster:

- + Keep a radio on or track social media for information and announcements. Make sure there are spare batteries for radios.
- + Avoid riding, driving or walking through a flooded area. Walk or drive cautiously. Debris-filled streets are dangerous. In flooded areas, washouts may have weakened roads and bridges, and they could collapse under the weight of your vehicle.
- + Don't touch any building, car or other structure that has a fallen power line touching it. Call the emergency services.
- + Be careful around damaged buildings and trees, which may be unstable. Look for leaning walls, sagging roofs and ceilings, and weakened support columns.
- + If possible, wear hard-wearing clothing, sturdy shoes and gloves.
- + Be aware that snakes, rodents and other animals may be displaced by the disaster, and may have taken refuge in storm debris or even in your home. Proper clean-up and disposal of debris will reduce the potential for nesting and animal and insect infestation. Watch where you place your hands and feet when removing or cleaning debris. If your debris will not be disposed of quickly, be sure to pile it as far from habitation as possible. Don't let children play on or around debris.
- + If you sustain even a minor injury, check your tetanus vaccination status, and seek medical advice as soon as possible. Bacteria which cause tetanus, or lockjaw, may lie dormant in soil. Once the dormant forms (spores) of tetanus enter the body, they begin to multiply and form a powerful toxin that affects muscles. About half the tetanus cases in the United States result from injuries considered trivial at the time they occur.



FOOD AND WATER SAFETY

- 💧 **Assume that all water supplies and food that have been in contact with flood-water are contaminated.** Floodwater may have flowed through the local sewerage system – such water may have elevated levels of bacteria, chemicals, pesticides, herbicides, fertilisers and gasoline. Do not eat any food that may have come into contact with floodwater.
- 💧 **Purify all water used for drinking, cooking and for washing.** Do not use or purify water that smells bad, has a dark colour, or contains floating material. Note that the purification procedures outlined here reduce biological contamination only; if you suspect chemical contamination, do not use the water.
- 💧 **Boiling is the most effective method of disinfecting of water.** Boil water for one full minute in a clean container. The flat taste can be improved by shaking the water in a bottle or pouring it from one container to another.
- 💧 **If you can't boil the water, you can treat it to make it safe.** If the water is clear, mix 1/8 teaspoon or 16 drops of unscented liquid chlorine laundry bleach with one gallon of water and let it stand for at least 30 minutes prior to consumption. If the water is cloudy or coloured, use 1/4 teaspoon per gallon of water. Be sure to mix thoroughly. If the treated water has a chlorine taste, pour it from one clean container to another several times.
- 💧 **Canned foods and dry mixes** will remain fresh for about two years. Discard cans that bulge at the ends or that are leaking.
- 💧 **Plan to have a minimum drinking supply of one gallon per person per day.** You will also need water for food preparation, bathing, brushing teeth, and dish washing. Store a 3 - 5 day supply of water (at least five gallons for each person).
- 💧 **Water should be stored in sturdy plastic bottles with tight-fitting lids away from direct sunlight.** All containers should be labelled. Stored water should be changed every six months.
- 💧 **Avoid placing water containers in areas where toxic substances, such as gasoline and pesticides, are present.** Vapours may penetrate the plastic over time.
- 💧 **If you use bottled water, make sure the seal has not been broken.** Otherwise, water should be boiled or treated before use. Drink only bottled, boiled, or treated water until your supply is tested and found safe.
- 💧 **In terms of emergency food, keep at least a three day supply of food on hand.** Include foods that have a long storage life, are not spicy or salty, require little or no cooking, water, or refrigeration, and foods that meet the needs of babies or other family members dependent on special diets. Don't forget about pets' needs.
- 💧 **Date all food items.** Use and replace food before it loses freshness.
- 💧 **Use perishable food in your refrigerator or freezer** before using food in your emergency supplies.
- 💧 **Eat only foods that have a normal colour, texture and odour.**
- 💧 **Consider alternative fuels,** camp stoves, charcoal (never burn charcoal indoors).

These are trying times

A natural disaster leaves more than a trail of property destruction in its wake. Many times it leaves thousands of victims with a destroyed sense of balance. In addition to avoiding physical hazards, restoring buildings and replacing material possessions during the recovery period, you need to be aware of stress and how to reduce it. It is normal to be numb, to feel disoriented, confused, anxious, grief, helpless, terrified, angry and despondent. You may have lost many things, including loved ones, homes, security, etc.

Be patient with yourself and others. Don't expect things to restore themselves instantly. Focus on the big picture instead of the little details.

Determine what's really important, and keep in mind that different people, even in your own household, will have different priorities. Be tolerant of mood swings and expressions of disbelief, anger, sadness, anxiety and depression.

Disasters are dreadful and disruptive with dire after effects. Lives and property can be lost with little warning, causing a great deal of heartache and suffering.

Don't overlook the feelings and needs of children.

Although severe disasters catch even the most conscientious and well-prepared people off-guard, diligent planning and preparation will help to bolster your response.

- Try to keep your body healthy and strong. Keep your family's diet as nourishing as possible. Make time for rest and relaxation.
- Talk with friends, family and ministers. In crisis situations, a supportive network is essential. Provide help to other families when possible; it will make both of you feel better. Spend time with people who care.
- Resist the temptation to resort to bad habits. Alcohol, blaming, denial, smoking, overeating and revenge eventually cause more problems than they solve.
- Take time to talk openly, honestly and often.
- Beyond a normal stress reaction, if you experience any of these symptoms at any time, seek professional help: a sense that the emotional and physical reactions are not normal; thoughts of ending your life or self-harm; loss of hope or interest in the future; avoiding things that bring back memories of what happened to the point where you're unable to carry out day-to-day tasks; being startled easily; feeling overwhelming fear for no obvious reason; panic attack symptoms: increased heart rate, breathlessness, shakiness, dizziness and a sudden urge to go to the toilet; excessive guilt about things that were or weren't said and done.
- Don't use alcohol or drugs to try to cope.
- Don't withdraw from family and friends.
- Don't stop yourself from doing things that you enjoy.
- Don't avoid talking about what happened.

