

When the raging rivers and high winds of Western Washington caused the rivers to swell to record levels and smash through levees in December 2007, the high water and winds tore communities apart, leaving human suffering and unprecedented property damage in their wake. Hundreds of businesses and farms and thousands of homes were left damaged – some of it irreparable. But the worst injuries may be invisible wounds, hidden inside thousands of human beings whose struggle against the trauma was just beginning.

The Human Effect

These storms touched the lives of thousands of people. For many the disaster continues as a very real presence: Ongoing red tape with agencies and insurance companies; endless work repairing property; financial problems; prolonged stress and tension; feelings of sadness, depression, frustration and anxiety. It is not unusual for these experiences and feelings to last for many months.

Learning to recognize the normal reactions and emotions that occur following a disaster can help you better understand these feelings and become more comfortable and effective in coping with them. This brochure can help explain the range of feelings and behaviors flood storm victims can experience. It also will help you understand how you, your family, your friends and your neighbors can help each other during this time of recovery.

The loss or damage to your home, property and personal belongings may have occurred weeks or months ago. But many of us find that our emotional reaction to the disaster – pushed aside during the actual crisis – often returns long after the event has passed.

It is very common for people to have these upsetting thoughts, feelings and flashbacks. And it is important to understand that they are absolutely normal reactions and you should not try to ignore them or hide them from yourself or others.

Outreach counselors with training in disaster stress management are available to help you, your family or your neighbors in the areas hit by the storms. A list of contact phone numbers is on the back panel of this brochure.

Normal Reactions, But Signs of Stress

Thoughts

- Trouble concentrating or remembering things
- Difficulty making decisions
- Frequently replaying the traumatic events and circumstances in your mind
- Recurring dreams or nightmares about the flood
- Questioning spiritual or religious beliefs

Feelings

- Being depressed, sad or down much of the time
- Irritable, short-tempered, easily upset, angry or resentful
- Anxiety or fear, especially when things remind you of the flood
- A sense of despair or hopelessness about the future
- Apathy, little interest in day-to-day concerns
- Feeling out of balance or “just not myself”



Behaviors

- Withdrawing from others, staying isolated
- Problems sleeping – fitful or troubled nights
- At times very alert or easily startled
- Keeping yourself too busy or preoccupied
- Avoiding activities, places or even people connected with the flood
- Crying easily, becoming sad for no apparent reason
- Changes in normal appetites

How to Cope

For yourself:

- Talk to others about how you are feeling. Be open and honest. It is important to talk about your experiences even if you don't understand what may be involved in your emotions and feelings. Don't be afraid to express sadness, grief, anger or fear about what happened and what you face.
- Take some time off from your routines. Go to the movies, remember to enjoy recreational activities, relax with a hobby or good friends.
- Do not let yourself become isolated. Reach out and maintain connections with family and community, coworkers, relatives and neighbors. It is healthy to share memories of the flood with others who may have seen and experienced similar trauma.
- Be conscious of your health and the stress you are feeling. Maintain a good diet, be sure to exercise and get enough sleep.
- Be cautious about self-medicating yourself with alcohol or drugs to "handle" your stress. In the long run, these habits will simply make your situation worse or lead to other problems.

For your family:

- Families should try to keep their routines in place – regular mealtimes, favorite group activities, and other familiar rituals. These events will help restore a feeling of normalcy.
- Couples should be conscious of their relationship and take time to be alone with each other. Talk about how you feel, and remember to have fun together.

For children:

- Take time to talk with your children about their experiences and memories of the flood. Encourage children to be open and honest about their feelings.
- This is a confusing and frightening time for young children especially, and they need you to be understanding and comforting.
- Be on the alert for changing behaviors: tantrums, sleeping problems, regressive behavior or argumentative behavior with siblings or friends.
- Illnesses – stomachaches or general malaise – can be a tip off to trauma links.
- Trust your general sense as a parent that something is wrong and discuss your suspicions with a mental health worker.

For the elderly:

- Older adults will share many of the apprehensions and depressions of the young, but they may have different feelings, too. It's important to ask for support, but older family members may be more reluctant to do so.
- Older adults may be worried about dependency or remaining self-sufficient in the future.
- They may also fear institutionalization or limited financial options, especially compared to younger victims.
- Talking about these natural feelings with family, friend or counselors may help put them into perspective.



To get help dealing with the pressures and aftermath of flooding and storm-related problems, please call this toll-free hot line: 1-800-850-8775

Community mental health programs also have established crisis counseling hot lines in every Washington county. Here are the numbers for areas of Western Washington heavily impacted by flooding:

Lewis County	1-800-559-6696
Grays Harbor County	1-800-685-6556
Pacific County	1-800-884-2298
Mason County	1-800-627-2211
Thurston County	1-800-627-2211
Kitsap County	1-800-843-4793
Snohomish County	1-800-584-3578
Jefferson County	
East County	1-800-659-0321
West County	1-360-374-5011
Nights, weekends	1-360-374-6271
Clallam County	
East County	1-360-452-4500
West County	1-360-374-5011

