



A Flood of Emotions

When Crisis Becomes Chronic

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service

As flood waters recede for some Kansans, others continue to experience the daily stress of evacuation from homes, loss of farms and businesses and uncertainty. Because of the continual “not knowing what’s next” people are unsure if they can return home while others wonder if they will yet have to evacuate. Natural disasters often lead to prolonged emotional and physical stress. Disasters can also lead to “lessons learned” as communities rebuild.

The Down Hill Slope: Prolonged Stress

During times of extreme stress, people experience varying stages of emotion. Alarm or shock is often the first stage, followed by resistance (denial) then exhaustion. “As the crisis continues for some or as clean-up begins for others, physical and emotional stress continues,” explains Charlie Griffin, KSU Extension Specialist, Rural Family Support. “Exhaustion, fear, anger, disillusionment, cynicism and depression are common. These responses are normal and appropriate for something (a home, a farm, a business, a dream) which is lost over a long period of time.”

Negative results of prolonged stress include:

- difficulty falling or staying asleep
- nightmares for children and adults
- irritability; outbursts of anger
- excessive drinking/drug use
- difficulty concentrating
- excessive worry, hypervigilance or extreme concern
- re-experiencing the traumatic event
- incapacitating guilt and self-doubt
- withdrawal and suspicion
- frequent loss of self-control
- sudden painful emotions
- apathy, avoidance of emotions, activities and situations associated with the event

- feelings of detachment from others, from the future, or from life

If these symptoms continue to persist well after the crisis is over or surface several months or even years later then the person might be experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Sometimes called shell shock or battle fatigue, PTSD can affect people who have survived the trauma of a natural disaster, such as flood. Mental health professionals are understanding more about prevalence of PTSD in adults, children and communities.

The natural disaster might also become a turning point in a person’s life which leads to insecurity, lack of confidence and fear. The person might lose sight of their lifetime goals. They may become helpless and hopeless.

Griffin says there is no right or wrong way to experience loss associated with crisis. “Everybody has their own individual time table for grief. Some people may go through the rest of their lives angry with the unfairness of the flood. Fortunately, grief can be one of the most healing things we can do. People don’t have to be *fixed* for crying.”

The Up Hill Climb: Recovery

Feelings of detachment, avoidance and apathy might be an effective way of conserving emotional energy and re-grouping. If people don’t get stuck in anger, grief, denial or depression then the healing cycle can continue. “Crisis has equal opportunity outcomes,” says Griffin. “People can learn valuable lessons by adversity.”

Lessons to be learned might include:

- reframing the meaning of life and setting priorities; finding larger purposes, value and meaning to life

- realizing the importance of relationships that helping others may be a way to “repay” the help received during the disaster
- the positive power of connection to our neighbors and communities
- the qualities of strong families; which include commitment, appreciation, communication time, coping and spiritual wellness
- the need to say thanks and the benefits of celebration

“When the volunteers have gone the flood survivors will be left to clean-up the mud in their basements. We must be sure we haven’t abandoned them in their grief,” Griffin cautions. Persons shouldn’t isolate themselves. It’s important to get out, talk to friends, share personal stories about the crisis and begin creating caring responses. Communities can counteract the isolation and withdrawal often associated with crisis and assist in the “up hill climb.”

Through the development of community support groups, guidance from mental health professionals, ministers and other caregivers, recovery and growth are possible.

How Can the Community Counteract Isolation and Withdrawal and Provide Support?

- 1** Emphasize the importance of community.
- 2** Help people be aware of the factors which work against community when experiencing a disaster.
- 3** Help people devise ways to deal with their distancing of other people’s emotions.
- 4** Emphasize that often people can be helped by small deeds.
- 5** Encourage people to find support when they need it and accept help.
- 6** Effective growth, development and maintenance of community require widespread support and knowledge of available resources.
- 7** Emphasize that the people in our lives are resources.
- 8** Create a structure which provides for longterm needs in the community.

Elaine M. Johannes
Project Manager, Rural Health Project