the personal nature of agriculture

Recovering from natural disasters

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Drought, fires, earthquakes, tornadoes, and floods. The impact of weather can dramatically alter the lives of families.

Natural disasters have been a way of life since earliest history. Even though families have developed strategies to live through disasters, these events still cause agony to individuals, families, and communities.\(^1\)

To successfully survive natural disasters, families need to understand the types of natural disasters, their impact on the family, and effective recovery strategies.

**Defining natural disasters**
Natural disasters run along a continuum, ranging from regularly occurring, predictable events to sudden, catastrophic ones. Predictable natural disasters most often include events such as floods, infestations, and droughts. These events usually display warning signs from months to years in advance, so families have time to prevent, or at least minimize, the damage. And families who may have experienced these predictable disasters before might be more prepared to deal with the situation again.

Catastrophic natural disasters, on the other hand, can occur with little or no warning. They may cause significant personal or property loss, and there is a greater sense of danger and helplessness than in predictable disasters. Examples of catastrophic disasters are tornadoes, earthquakes, and hurricanes. However, under certain conditions, normally predictable events may turn into unpredictable, catastrophic events. For example, floods are often predictable due to climatic conditions. Yet a flash flood can occur without warning and cause great destruction. The same would hold true for fires—forest fires and wildfires.\(^2\)

**Perceptions of disaster**
Why are catastrophic disasters so traumatic? Researchers have identified four perceptions common to survivors of major disasters:

- People perceive disasters as highly dangerous. They fear for their lives and the lives of others.
- Disasters cause a sense of helplessness. People cannot control the disasters nor prevent the destruction that occurs.
- Disasters cause major destruction and disruption. People cannot deny the reality of the impact on their lives.
- Disasters result in a sense of loss. Survivors are overwhelmed by the loss of homes, neighborhoods, loved ones, or lifetime belongings.\(^3\)
Families in disaster

Families that were not functioning adequately before the disaster most likely will have problems coping after the event. How the family views the disaster, the kinds of family problems the disaster creates, the support and resources available from the community and agencies, and previous experience in coping with disasters all result in the situation becoming a crisis or a challenge.4

Recovering from disaster

Families that cope best with disasters are those that successfully adjust to other normal life crises. They take an optimistic view of the disaster and see the hardships as challenges. They embrace the disaster and let the crisis teach them how strong their families can be.5 Strong families are survivors—not victims. Some of the more successful strategies for recovering from disasters include:

- Preparing and anticipating. One of the best ways to cope with a disaster is to be prepared. A family that determines how to respond to a disaster ahead of time will cope more successfully when the disaster does occur. If, for example, the home borders a national forest and is vulnerable to a forest fire, what evacuation plan does the family have? Can fire fighting equipment access the property? What steps can be taken before a fire that will reduce property damage?

- Uniting as a family. The family (immediate or extended, depending on the circumstances) is the major source of help for disaster victims, who may need to talk out their traumatic experiences. They need to vent, cry, be angry, and begin to adjust. If the family provides encouragement, emotional support, and even economic relief where needed, the affected disaster victims are more likely to recover successfully.

- Expecting to recover. A family that expects to recover successfully is more likely to do so than a family who believes there is little hope. Without a hopeful outlook, morale declines and dysfunctional behavior becomes more prevalent.

- Returning to normal. The re-establishment of normal activities is an important step in recovery. Whether it is rebuilding the home, returning to work, or reconnecting with friends, a family fares much better if members make the best of the situation and return to as normal a daily pattern as possible.

- Finding solutions. An attitude of developing strategies to cope with the aftermath of the natural disaster is more effective in recovery than adopting a blaming attitude. For example, if the family suffered an economic loss as a result of a disaster, the family might cope by making a realistic assessment of their losses, insurance coverage, and relief programs available. They could prioritize needs and develop an action plan for financial recovery.
Taking advantage of help. A family that uses the available recovery resources will recover faster and more successfully than a family that attempts to “go it alone” without the help of others.6

Natural disasters not only leave a trail of property destruction in their wake, but can also leave survivors with a damaged sense of security. In addition to restoring buildings and replacing material possessions, families need to devote time to restoring their own emotional equilibrium during the recovery period.7

Whether a natural disaster is predictable or catastrophic, families can take positive action to survive and become stronger because of it. Functional families keep telling themselves they will get through the disaster because tomorrow will be better in so many ways.

References


3. Smith, 142.


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