Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Assisting the Elderly With Disaster

Issues And Tips Regarding Stress Effects In The Elderly

Several issues need to be taken into account when helping elderly friends and family who may be under stress after a disaster and who are suffering from the effects of a sudden relocation.

Communication Problems

Some older persons in shelters or in new surroundings may have difficulty

- Understanding family and friends.
- Talking to people or answering questions.

Normal age-related slowing of thinking, problems with seeing and hearing, and reduced ability to physically move because of illnesses or the effects of medications may cause this. Make sure that the elderly person has the eyeglasses they need and that their hearing aid is on before talking to them. Be patient and calm. Speak loudly enough for them to hear you, but do not shout. Keep your messages simple and clear. Repeat information and make sure that the person in your care hears and understands what is said.

Danger From Falls

Be aware that in unfamiliar settings, clutter and poor lighting could cause an elderly person to fall. Balance problems, muscle weakness, and medications can add to their risk of falling. Check new living quarters for anything that could lead to a fall, for example, loose throw rugs. Make sure stairs and hallways are well lit and provide walking assistance if needed.

Chronic Illness and Dietary Considerations

Arthritis may prevent an elderly family member from standing in line. Some medications can cause mental confusion or a greater susceptibility to problems such as dehydration. Memory problems can cause communication problems. Neglect of special meal needs in certain illnesses can lead to medical crises.

As soon as possible, make sure the elderly family member

- Has all of their medicines with them.
- Eats the foods require to manage their illnesses.
- Has written diet and medication information with them in case they are separated from you.
- Establishes contact with their medical care provider or that you help them find a new one and provide their medical history to the care provider.

Disoriented Behavior

At night, when nearby surroundings are not seen as well as in the day, some elderly with mild or moderate dementia or problems thinking clearly can become confused about where they are. You may need to orient them to time and place.

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Make sure the elderly person has a clock and a calendar in their room. If you have any familiar things of theirs, place those in their room. Be sure that there is some soft, nonglaring light in their room and that it is as quiet and calm as possible. If you cannot reorient the elderly person to where they are and your efforts upset them, just reassure them or distract them with other activities.

Multiple Loss Effect

The elderly family member who may have lost their spouse, income, home, or physical capabilities may have difficulty "bouncing back" from their loss. Show empathy for the person's situation by listening. Give comfort by your presence and let them know you are there and care for them. Do not minimize what they have lost.

Worries About Loss Of Independence

Loss of the ability to live independently because of disaster-related injury or loss of home can be the biggest blow that a disaster deals the elderly. Within the constraints of the situation, allow them to do what they can for themselves and keep as much dignity and independence as is possible.

"Welfare" Stigma and Unfamiliarity with Bureaucracy

Many older family members are unwilling to accept government "welfare" assistance because they have always "paid their way." In a disaster, however, government help may be needed. Their unwillingness to accept help may be made worse by unfamiliarity with government services for which they are eligible, particularly during disasters.

If the person is reluctant to accept assistance, relate the assistance to a time when they helped someone in need or explain that this help comes from taxes they have paid.

Getting Too Hot Or Too Cold

Older person may not handle extremes of heat or cold well. Either too much heat or cold can have marked effects upon them. This becomes critical in disasters that close down furnaces or air conditioners. Be aware of the need to keep elderly family members out of extremes of heat and cold.

Dehydration

Elderly persons are more susceptible to dehydration. They do not feel thirsty as quickly as young people do and do not drink water and other liquids as often. Some of the medicine they take can also lead to water loss.

Check to make sure that your elderly relatives have access to safe, clean drinking water and that they are drinking it. Watch for signs of dehydration, such as sunken eyes, no tears, and dry mouth.

Language And Cultural Barriers

Lower reading skills among some elders and inadequate command of the English language among speakers of other languages can cause confusion and frustration at relief centers or in new housing locations. Try to match the elderly person with someone fluent in his or her native language.

Senior Citizens Dealing With Change

Remember that elderly persons have the strengths gained from a lifetime of coping with adversity. Know also that elderly people tend to underreport problems, both to family and physicians, as they may want to cope on their own. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to how they feel and act in times of change and relocation.

Signs Of Stress In The Elderly

The elderly can suffer various symptoms from worsening of preexisting medical problems, problems with medications, new illnesses, or psychological stress. Therefore, it is important to make sure that they are medically stable before deciding these symptoms are due to emotional stress.

Under stress, whether from physical or emotional sources, people who are elderly can

- Become mentally confused
- Tire easily
- Withdraw from friends and family
- In severe cases, undergo personality changes

You should also know that the elderly might tend to complain of bodily symptoms rather than emotional problems when under stress. Again, remember not to dismiss any bodily symptoms as just due to stress.

Special Issues For The Frail Elderly

Many elderly are very healthy, well-functioning, capable adults. For example, according to the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, at age 60 years, only 15% of elderly people suffer from dementia; at age 85 years, 50% of the elderly are affected by dementia. The older, frailer elderly are the ones who may be more vulnerable in a disaster due to medical illnesses.

How To Help The Elderly Deal With Stress

In general terms, these principles will help guide you when helping an elderly person deal with the stress of evacuation and relocation:

- Provide strong and persistent verbal reassurance.
- Assist with recovery of physical possessions as is safe, make frequent home visits, and arrange for companions.
- Give special attention to suitable residential relocation, ideally in familiar surroundings with friends or acquaintances.
- Help reestablish contact with family and friends.
- Assist in obtaining medical and financial assistance.
- Help re-establish medication and any dietary regimens.
- Provide transportation to the doctor, grocery store, etc.

Where To Get Emergency Assistance

There are local, national, and government organizations that offer help during emergencies and disasters. If your property was not insured, these organizations may be able to help with rebuilding expenses as well:

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Register for disaster assistance by calling: 1-800-621-FEMA (3362)

http://www.fema.gov; https://disasterhelp.gov

The American Red Cross

1-800-HELP-NOW (1-800-435-7669)

http://www.redcross.org

National Hurricane Center

http://www.nhc.noaa.gov

The Salvation Army

http://www.salvationarmyusa.org

The United Way

2-1-1

http://www.211.org

A Disaster Recovery Center may be established in or near the community affected by the disaster. There you can meet with representatives of federal, state, local, and volunteer agencies.

Local churches, service organizations (such as the Kiwanis Club, Lions, or Knights of Columbus), large local employers, and local newspapers and banks may offer help.

Long-Term Recovery

After you have met your immediate needs and are ready to begin recovery, prepare by:

- Replacing important documents that were lost or destroyed such as your driver's license, auto registration, bank books, insurance policies, health insurance cards, credit cards, titles to deeds, stocks and bonds, wills, and other important documents.
- Saving receipts for all your expenses, or at least keeping a record of them. These will help both in filing an insurance claim and in claiming losses when you file your income tax return.
- Making lists of all property that was damaged or destroyed. These will prove useful for filing insurance claims or seeking financial assistance. Document as much of the damage as you can with photographs or video. Include as much of the following information as you can for each item:
    - Name, description, model, year, ID number
    - Where and when you bought it, and the price
    - Documentation such as a sales slip, canceled check, warranty, or correspondence with the manufacturer or retailer
    - Description of the damage and what caused it
    - Photographs that show the item before and after it was damaged

- Recalling as much as you can that's missing
- Letting utility companies know if they should stop billing to your home because you can't live in it.
- Getting in touch with creditors to request any needed extensions in payments.

Once you have met your immediate needs for food and shelter, and have begun the process of rebuilding, the emotional impact of your experience may begin to take its toll. Your Employee Assistance Program is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to help you deal with the feelings you may have after surviving this major, life changing event.

Remember that wherever you are, your confidential **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** is available and accessible 24/7/365.

Contact your EAP at **1.866.468.9461** or visit **workhealthlife.com/us**.