

Coping with Flooding

A beautiful summer evening in June! The air is clear and a balmy breeze blows. The tree frogs are singing in happy harmony. But this night the tranquility is broken by the unending grind and groan of heavy trucks alongside hundreds of volunteers filling sandbags in an attempt to save homes, businesses, and University buildings.

As I hurry through the streets the next day, the air is heavy with tension as the invading army of water continues to advance. People who are directly affected with the loss of their homes are exhausted from worry, work, and the dread of the unknown. Volunteer workers begin to drag after hours of intense physical labor. Others are concerned for the welfare of family members, neighbors, friends, and colleagues who live in the water's path.

How do we handle the physical and mental strain of this attack on our city? How do we manage the disruption, loss of routine, isolation, unknown, exhaustion, grief and loss, or anger?

Reach out for support. Neighbors, friends, churches, or other circles of people can provide reassurance and support. University and community resources are readily available.

Express your feelings. Talk to trusted friends or community members. It is normal in a crisis situation to experience a wide range of emotion, from shock and disbelief to anxiety and worry to anger. Talk about your feelings. And remember, anger turned inward is one possible factor contributing to depression.

Remember to eat. It is important to maintain physical stamina in order to cope with this crisis.

Help out with the volunteer relief efforts. Sandbagging, opening your home to friends who have damaged homes, sharing meals, assisting at relief shelters, or offering a sympathetic ear helps to maintain your own sense of purpose and being useful.

Maintain as much of your normal routine as possible. Routine contributes to balance and order in times of chaos. For those severely impacted by flooding, this of course, is most difficult.

Be prepared for emotional "ups and downs." With the closing of a number of University buildings and residence halls, disruption in utilities, and limited access to areas of Iowa City, we must prepare for a period of time of turmoil, distress, and disruption.

Knowledge is power. Stay connected to local television or newspaper announcements about current flooding information. But be sure to limit televised images of flood disaster if this contributes to or increases your anxiety.

What kinds of warnings signs might we look for that would indicate that a person is not coping effectively?

Mainly, a downward emotional spiral and prolonged difficulty getting back to “normal” that interferes with a person’s daily functioning would be a sign that the individual is having difficulty coping with the situation.

Outbursts of anger, excessive alcohol or other drug use, a low mood that just won’t lift, or feelings of hopelessness and despair are all warning signs of difficulty coping and might warrant a visit to a mental health professional or family physician for a second opinion.

Realize you cannot control everything. We are not always able to predict or control disasters and trauma. Work to integrate this fact into your life view.

Practice good self-care. Take time to stop for a moment and reflect on something you find positive. Perhaps a friend’s offer to help or the people important in your life. Eat, sleep, and exercise as well as you can within your current circumstances.

Don’t panic! For all of the distress and disruption that natural disasters impose, we often find that they bring out the best in people as they work together and support each other in most difficult times. This is the time for all of us to dig down deep, to shore up our internal resources, and to reach out and lend a helping hand. Take a deep breath. We are all in this together.

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