

# After the Disaster:

## *Phases of Community Adjustment*



The time around natural disasters has been divided into the phases of warning, threat, impact, inventory, rescue, remedy, and recovery. While those phases describe many aspects of disaster preparedness and response, there are also phases to victims' and communities' emotional recovery from disaster. Counselors helping the victims of disaster have identified specific phases of emotional adjustment. These stages are:

### **Heroic Phase**

This period usually occurs at the time of the impact and in the period immediately after. Emotions are strong and direct. People find themselves being called upon and responding to demands for heroic action to save their own and others' lives and property. People work hard helping others survive and recover. Others who are not directly impacted by the disaster contribute time, money, and other resources to the victims. The most important resources for personal coping during this phase are family, neighbors, and emergency teams of various sorts.

### **Honeymoon Phase**

This period generally extends from one week to six months after the disaster. For those who have survived, even with the loss of loved ones and possessions, there is a strong sense of having shared

with others a dangerous, catastrophic experience and having lived through it. During this phase, the victims clear the debris and clean out the wreckage from their homes and communities. This work is supported and often encouraged by the influx of official governmental and nonprofit agency staff who promise various kinds of help. There is anticipation that more help soon will be available. Preexisting community groups and emerging community groups that develop from the specific needs caused by the disaster are especially important community resources during this period.

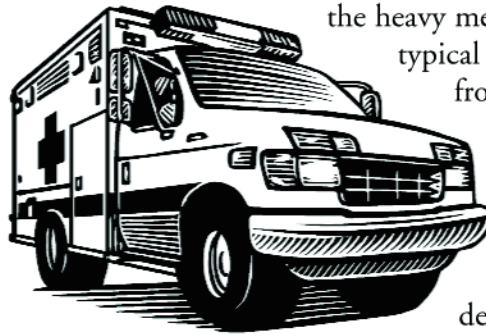
### **Disillusionment Phase**

This phase generally lasts from about two months to two or more years after the disaster. Strong feelings of disappointment, anger, resentment, and bitterness may appear if failures occur and the promises of aid are not fulfilled. Outside agencies may need to leave, and some of the community groups may weaken. Some people assign blame to public and private agencies for not preventing the disaster or for not doing a better job of helping to correct it. Also contributing to this stage may be the gradual loss of the feeling of "shared community" as the victims concentrate on rebuilding their own lives and solving their individual problems.



## Reconstruction Phase

The victims have come to realize that they will need to solve the problems of rebuilding their own homes, businesses, farms, and lives largely by themselves and have gradually assumed responsibility for the tasks. During this phase, generally lasting for several years following the disaster, the appearance of new buildings replacing old ones, the beginnings of new construction, and the development of new programs and plans all serve to reaffirm people's belief in their community and their own capabilities. If these signs of progress are delayed, however, the emotional problems which appear may be serious and intense. Community groups with a long-term investment in the community and its people become key elements during this phase.



These emotional passages are typical not only of the victims directly affected by a disaster, but with the heavy media coverage of disasters that is typical today, many people far removed from the direct effects of the disaster may also experience these phases. Persons who are far removed from the disaster tend to recover more quickly than those confronted with its destruction daily. The phases can overlap for an individual, and a victim may move back and forth between the phases, but nearly all disaster victims will experience all the phases eventually. Recognizing these phases of emotional adjustment can help individuals, families, and communities understand their coping process as normal and predictable.

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