

PLANNING, PREPARATION, AND RESPONSE TO EMERGENCIES: *How to Minimize Distress and Disruption for You and Your Family*

Risk is a part of everyday life, at home and at work. Motor vehicle accidents, natural disasters, breaches of information, terrorist threats, and other high risk and emergency situations routinely make headline news.

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Possible Emergencies

In some cases, an actual emergency has occurred, such as a hurricane or mass shooting. In other situations, the concern may focus more on the potential risk of an emergency occurring, such as the spread of an infectious illness or threats of terrorists targeting military personnel and their families. Though all emergencies have the potential to increase anxiety, threats that target specific people can be particularly stressful for those individuals.

Why Are Planning and Preparation Important?

When emergencies occur, most people want to know what they should do and if they and their loved ones are safe. Feeling unprepared can result in increased confusion and anxiety, which can lead to harmful behaviors such as increasing alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use or overreliance on prescription medication. It can also lead people to become irritable and withdrawn, limiting social supports. These behaviors reduce our ability to function effectively at work and provide care for ourselves and loved ones. Planning in advance and being prepared can reduce anxiety that results when emergencies occur. It can also help us respond more effectively to make safer and healthier choices for ourselves, our families, and our communities.

Steps for Planning and Preparing Your Family

Planning for the needs of your family will help you be more prepared in the event of an emergency. Preparation is most effective when you have helpful resources and credible

■ **Develop a Family Emergency Plan.** This will help your family know what steps to take in the event of an actual or

threatened emergency. Planning together, in role and age appropriate ways, can enhance family communication and allow everyone to feel invested in adhering to the plan. The plan should provide specific, detailed, age-appropriate guidance for all family members on actions to take during an emergency. Make sure your plan addresses situations in which your family is together and when geographically separated. Being apart from family during an emergency is extremely stressful and having a plan to communicate and connect helps reduce anxiety. Update and rehearse the plan at least once a year, or when situations change (e.g., a new job or the addition of a family member) to ensure everyone remains aware and ready to respond. An example Family Emergency Plan can be found in the Additional Resources section.

- **Have an Emergency Go Kit at home.** This kit provides commonly needed items in the event of an emergency, particularly things that may be unavailable as a result of power or communication outages. Review your kit and replace expired items at least once a year. An example Emergency Go Kit can be found in the Additional Resources section.
- **Know and understand other Emergency Plans that are relevant to your family.** This includes places of work, schools your children attend, and local or regional plans that affect your neighborhood.
- **Ensure access to credible sources of information through official news media and community leaders.**

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- **Credible information allows us to accurately assess the real risk and respond appropriately.** Be cautious of taking action based on informal information shared through email, social media, and even neighbors. During emergencies, rumors spread quickly but may contain false information that only increase anxiety and lead to poor courses of action. Also, a radio that can be used without electricity can ensure access to important, useful information during power or network outages.
- **Ensure access to critical medications and devices.** Work with your primary care provider to ensure you have at least 1–2 weeks of these medications at all times to avoid running out during emergencies. If your medications need refrigeration, or you rely on electric medical devices, consider a small portable generator and a supply of fuel for your home to keep your refrigerator and other critical devices working when the power is out.

When emergencies occur, the following can help you respond in a safe way:

- Ensure basic needs for food, shelter, and sleep are met first. This helps people feel safe.
- Listen to concerns your loved ones may have and seek credible information to answer any questions. This can calm anxiety and worry.
- Be friendly and compassionate to loved ones, neighbors, and strangers. Your support goes a long way toward helping others.
- Make sure the family stays together or in touch as much as possible and keep children near you.
- Help people when you can, but encourage them to get their own basic needs met whenever possible. This gives people confidence during stressful situations.
- Be aware of normal reactions to emergency and other stressful situations. These include: trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and nightmares. Understand and share with your family that these

things usually go away in a short time. Talk to your primary care provider if they persist for too long, continue to worsen, or cause problems at work or home.

- Ask kids about their concerns and listen to what they say. Sometimes they have fears that seem unusual or “magical” about what is causing an emergency to occur. Make sure they know it’s not their fault that something stressful is happening.
- Tell kids what they need to know about what is happening using age-appropriate information; for young children, this usually means providing only basic facts using simple language, while older children and adolescents will need more information.
- Limit exposure to television, radio, and other media. Because of its often graphic and repetitive nature, an over exposure to media during emergency situations can increase anxiety, particularly for children.
- Avoid using alcohol or other drugs to manage stress or worry. If your anxiety feels too high, call your primary care provider to discuss safe options for helping you feel calmer.
- Avoid simple reassurance like “everything will be okay,” making promises you cannot keep, telling people what they should feel, or forcing people to talk who are not ready. These can undermine trust and social connection and increase peoples’ stress and worry.

Additional Resources

Family Emergency Plan sample:

https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/PDF_s/Preparedness___Disaster_Recovery/General_Preparedness___Recovery/Home/ARC_Family_Disaster_Plan_Template_r083012.pdf

Emergency Go Kit sample:

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/hemophilia/documents/familyemergencykitchecklist.pdf>