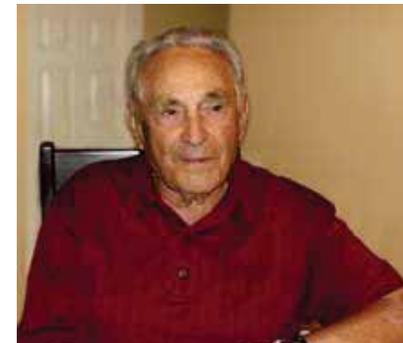




## Helping Seniors Recover and Stay Well after a Disaster or Emergency Tips for Families and Caregivers



A disaster or emergency can cause loss and change that goes beyond the immediate damage. Seniors are not all alike—neither are reactions to a disaster or emergency. Some seniors have past life experiences that can help to cope with hard times and stress after a disaster or emergency. For others, the disaster may bring back memories that can make it harder to cope. It's important to remember that support is available after a disaster or emergency.



### Things to think about

- Seniors may be overlooked during and after a disaster or emergency. Over time the combination of health and family issues, money problems, and increased stress may lower a senior's ability to cope.
- Seniors are more likely to take regular medicine. It's important that all medicine is taken only as directed by a family doctor or healthcare provider (e.g., over using or under using).
- Seniors may be less likely to recognize or talk about their feelings. Instead, emotional reactions to a disaster or emergency may be expressed through physical aches and pains. Getting fresh air and taking part in enjoyable activities can improve emotional wellness.



Some seniors may need additional help, including those who:

- have memory problems (e.g., Alzheimer's disease, dementia).
- are living with a chronic illness or disability due to mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia, anxiety, depression).
- require regular medication or health treatments to manage chronic conditions.
- are in poor physical health, have reduced mobility or need help with everyday tasks.
- have problems with vision or hearing.
- lack close family caregivers, friends, community connections or a support network
- are not able to speak or read English.

### How to help support seniors who are going through a disaster or emergency:

After a disaster or emergency, it's important to support seniors. Be mindful of special needs and make time to offer practical and emotional help.

#### Practical ways to help

##### **Not all seniors need help**

Seniors can be very supportive—most have the knowledge and life experience to help others cope. Seniors can be great volunteers. It's important that seniors are welcomed and know about opportunities to participate in relief efforts. Volunteering is a good way for seniors to feel more connected to communities and to make new friends.



### **Assistance with financial information and relief application forms**

Relief forms can be confusing and hard to complete. Offer help to fill out applications. Some seniors may not be comfortable with receiving financial support. Take the time to explain that support is available to anyone who is affected by a disaster or emergency.



### **Transportation concerns**

Some seniors don't own a car or have the ability to drive; when possible, do the driving, arrange rides or help with public transportation.

### **Rebuilding**

Support seniors to make their own decisions about rebuilding or relocating. For some seniors, the thought of rebuilding may be overwhelming and for some it may not be an option. Help develop a plan that is appropriate under the circumstances. If needed, include suggestions for relocating or rebuilding. Seniors are at a greater risk for abuse related to scams or cons. Talk to seniors about the risks and suggest ways to stay safe.

### **Daily needs**

Make sure that seniors have aids such as glasses, hearing aids, dentures and walking aids (e.g., canes or walkers) and their medication to support wellness.

### **Ways to help cope**

Focus on strengths and abilities. Help seniors stay connected. Friends and community groups are important. Reconnect seniors with their peer and community supports



as soon as possible. Provide accurate, up-to-date information. This is particularly important for seniors living in temporary housing.

### ***Additional things to consider***

- Take the time to actively listen. Provide comfort and a safe environment.
- Allow time for grief and healing. When ready, encourage speaking openly about your thoughts, feelings, fears or worries.
- Seniors may worry about pets. Make sure that all pets receive support and care.

### **Seniors don't have to go through a disaster or emergency alone. Encourage seniors to make new friendships and ask for help, when needed.**

Changes in daily routines caused by disasters or emergencies may result in increased stress, coping issues, confusion, unhappiness and anxiety in seniors, particularly for those who have Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia.

To help reduce stress and improve emotional health, families and caregivers should try to limit disruptions and re-establish routines that include social and physical activities as quickly as possible. Socializing with family and friends can help seniors regain a sense of hope and optimism about the future.



Signs of stress are common after a disaster or emergency, but get better with time.

### ***Physical or Behavioural***

- moodiness or crying easily
- headaches
- disoriented or confused
- stomach problems
- trouble concentrating or paying attention
- appetite changes
- wandering or calling out
- incontinence
- vision problems (e.g., tunnel vision)
- changes in sleep
- hearing problems (e.g., muffled hearing)
- increased use or misuse of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

### ***Emotional***

- feeling hopeless or helpless
- constantly thinking about the disaster or emergency
- feeling tired, lack of energy or motivation
- having flashbacks to the disaster or emergency
- feeling worried or frustrated
- staying away from people or things that they normally like
- feeling depressed or down
- feeling guilt, disappointment or shame
- thoughts of self-harm or harm to others
- anger



**Talk about concerns or changes to physical health. Changes may be linked to emotional well-being and the ability to cope after a disaster or extreme emergency.**

If you are caring for a senior and notice changes in memory, behaviour or usual routines see a healthcare professional or call Health Link Alberta at **811**.

Seniors who are feeling disoriented, confused, have lost a sense of hope, purpose or the willingness to move forward should be assessed for depression or risk of suicide; call **911** or go to the nearest emergency department.

Health Link

**811**

Mental Health Help Line

**1-877-303-2642**

Open 24 hours a day,  
7 days a week

To order free copies of this resource visit

<https://dol.datacm.com/>

Login ID: mentalhealthresources

Password: mh2016

Produced by

Mental Health Promotion & Illness Prevention

email: [hpdip.mh.earlyid@ahs.ca](mailto:hpdip.mh.earlyid@ahs.ca)

Copyright ©2016 Alberta Health Services.

This material is protected by Canadian and other international copyright laws. All rights reserved. These materials may not be copied, published, distributed or reproduced in any way in whole or in part without the express written permission of Alberta Health Services. These materials are intended for general information only and are provided on an "as is," "where is" basis. Although reasonable efforts were made to confirm the accuracy of the information, Alberta Health Services does not make any representation or warranty, express, implied or statutory, as to the accuracy, reliability, completeness, applicability or fitness for a particular purpose of such information. These materials are not a substitute for the advice of a qualified health professional. Alberta Health Services expressly disclaims all liability for the use of these materials, and for any claims, actions, demands or suits arising from such use.

Revised: 2016-05-10 Reprint: 2016-05-10