

BRSS TACS

Bringing Recovery Supports to Scale

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER STRATEGY

TIP SHEET 3

Disaster Preparedness Tips for Individuals with Mental Illness or Substance Use Disorder and Their Families

Most of us don't like to think about the possibility of fires, floods, hurricanes, or other disasters damaging our communities or our homes. However, there are a few simple steps we can take to protect ourselves and our loved ones from disaster, and most of them are inexpensive or free. This tip sheet prepares you for the actions you may need to take during or after a disaster strikes.

Taking Action: Steps You Can Take During or Following a Disaster

If a Disaster Occurs, Put Your Plan Into Action

Stay calm! You've already developed a family communication and disaster plan. If your plan is to shelter in place, it is also important to prepare for the possibility that you may have to evacuate in the future.

If you have a preexisting mental illness, substance use disorder, or both, continue with your treatment plan during an emergency to the best that conditions allow and monitor for any new or increased symptoms.

Communicate



Help children or other sensitive family members by

- letting them know that it is all right to be upset;
- giving clear explanations; and
- telling them they are safe.



Try to keep in touch with your out-of-area contact and have them check on you and your family regularly.



Text and use social media. Cell service may not work during an emergency. Emailing is also a good choice.

Evacuation Action Steps

- ❑ Always follow the local emergency management agency's (EMS) instructions.
- ❑ Find open shelters by texting SHELTER and your zip code to 4FEMA or by using the [Red Cross's search tool](https://www.redcross.org/get-help/disaster-relief-and-recovery-services/find-an-open-shelter.html) (<https://www.redcross.org/get-help/disaster-relief-and-recovery-services/find-an-open-shelter.html>).



Medication Tips

If you need to relocate, even temporarily, bring:

- all of your medications with you
- the items you need to obtain medication refills from a new facility, including a photo id; medication containers of currently prescribed medications (even if they are empty); written scripts; packaging labels that contain dose, physician, and refill information; and any payment receipts that contain medication information (SAMHSA, 2013).
- your Smartcard, which includes your photo id and encrypted medical information, if that is provided by your opioid treatment program (OTP).

If you need more of your medication, take action:

- [People with a Medicare drug plan](https://www.medicare.gov/what-medicare-covers/getting-prescriptions-in-disaster-or-emergency) (<https://www.medicare.gov/what-medicare-covers/getting-prescriptions-in-disaster-or-emergency>) can get instructions via the official U.S. Government Medicare site.
- [People without a Medicare drug plan](https://www.healthcareready.org/blog/state-emergency-refills) (<https://www.healthcareready.org/blog/state-emergency-refills>) can get instructions via the Healthcare Ready site.

While most people receive buprenorphine treatment by an office-based Drug Addiction Treatment Act-waived doctor, in settings other than OTPs, if you are displaced in the event of a disaster, you may be treated in OTP settings (SAMHSA, 2013)

- If you need to find a hotel or other place to stay, making these arrangements should be one of the first things you do. Rooms outside of the danger area fill up fast.
- Follow your family communication plan. If you have time before you need to leave, call the out-of-area contact person you chose.
- Shut off water, gas, and electricity.
- Unplug electrical equipment such as radios, televisions, and small appliances. Leave freezers and refrigerators plugged in unless there is a risk of flooding.
- Take your pet.
- Lock your home.
- Wear sturdy shoes and clothing that offer some protection such as long pants, long-sleeved shirts, and a hat.
- Leave a note in your home that tells others where you are.
- Write your phone number with permanent marker on family members' backs.
- Take the disaster supplies and emergency supply kit you made earlier. Make sure you have medications and a copy of important documents.
- Follow recommended exit routes. Do not take shortcuts because they might be blocked.
- Look for road hazards, such as washed-out roads or bridges, downed power lines, and other difficulties.
- Bear in mind traffic jams, weather conditions, road closures, and the need for gasoline.
- Understand your immediate choices under the [Food Stamp Program](https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/food-assistance-disaster-situations) (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/food-assistance-disaster-situations>). Contact the public information staff at the USDA Nutrition and Food Service at 703-305-2281.

Shelter-in-Place Action Steps

- Notify the local EMS and your out-of-area contact. Set up regular check-ins with them. Have someone check on you and your family after the emergency passes.
- Put a sign on your home that shows you have chosen to stay there so officials can find you after the emergency passes.
- Tune into local radio and TV stations for emergency information.
- Go to the safe place in your home that you chose during the “Just in Case” stage and bring your pets with you.
- Use duct tape and sheets of plastic to seal all cracks around the door and other openings in the room.

Know when to Seek Help

It may be important to seek help for you or a loved one if the following symptoms persist and interfere with daily functioning:

- excessive worry
 - frequent crying
 - increased irritability, anger, arguing
 - wanting to be alone, isolating
 - feeling anxious, fearful
 - overwhelmed by sadness, confusion
 - trouble thinking clearly, concentrating, and making difficult decisions
 - increase in alcohol or substance use
 - physical aches or pains
 - changes in appetite, energy, and activity levels
- (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention n.d.)

Key Tips for Recovering From the Disaster

If you have left your home, rely on news reports, friends, neighbors, and social media to get the latest, most reliable information about when you should return.

Check your home's damage. Take photographs of any damage, apply for aid, and file insurance claims. Walk carefully around the outside and check for loose power lines, gas leaks, and structural damage. Inside, check for mold and water damage and remove major debris.

When you return home, be aware of safety issues. There may be debris in roadways and elsewhere, familiar roads may not be open, power lines may be down, and police and fire/rescue services may not be available.

Do not enter your home if you smell gas; water from the flood remains around the building; or there was a fire in your home and the fire department has not yet said it is safe.

Get help:

- **Disaster Distress Helpline:** Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.
- **National Helpline:** Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357) to get referrals to local treatment centers, support groups, and community-based organizations.
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** Call 1-800-273-8255 for support in times of crisis and emotional distress.
- **Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator:** Visit findtreatment.samhsa.gov and enter your zip code.
- **211 Local Emergency Information:** Dial 211 for referrals to government and community-based programs that help with housing, access to health care, food, and other services.
- **Crisis Text Line:** Text HOME to 741741 to message a trained crisis counselor.

How to Support Yourself and Others with the Effects of a Disaster

People have many different reactions and responses to a disaster, including feeling tired, frustrated, angry, tired, or sad. They may also experience trouble making decisions and changes in eating habits. Know that intense feelings during and following a disaster are expected. Adults and children with mental illness and substance use disorder may find that their symptoms are getting worse. It is more important than ever during periods of high stress to take time for treatment and activities that support wellness, including exercise, talking with helpful friends or family members, writing down feelings, or attending groups. If you are not in your own community, a great place to connect with helpful people is through community organizations in or near where you are staying. You may also reach out to and rely on:

- mutual-help and recovery groups or advocates for support;
- modified crisis counseling services which may be available via phone or internet to alleviate distress;
- volunteer organizations such as the [National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster](http://www.nvoad.org) (www.nvoad.org) may be able to provide assistance with medication pickup, transportation to appointments, contacting family members, etc.; or
- volunteer organizations that provide disaster case management services for individuals with mental illness, substance use disorder, or both.

Remember and understand that everybody reacts to disaster in different ways. You and your loved ones may need extra support, time, or space to recover from this experience. As you try to be patient, take care to learn to recognize and pay attention to the warning signs in yourself and others. It takes time to adjust and to reconnect with the supports that have helped you in the past.

This is one of a series of four tips sheets on disaster preparedness. The other titles in this series include:

- **Tip Sheet 1**—Just in Case: Steps You Can Take at Any Time to Increase Your Disaster Preparedness
- **Tip Sheet 2**—Planning: Steps You Can Take When a Disaster Is Heading Toward Your Community or Home
- **Tip Sheet 4**—Forms and Checklists to Guide Your Disaster Planning

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). Coping with a disaster or traumatic event. Retrieved from <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/selfcare.asp>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2013). *Disaster planning handbook for behavioral health treatment programs* (Technical Assistance Publication (TAP) Series 34). HHS Publication No. (SMA) 13-4779. Rockville, MD: Author.

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