



Coping After a Tornado

Tornadoes are one of the most traumatic of natural disasters to experience. They usually occur suddenly, with little or no warning, and can leave you dealing with losses of all kinds. You may have lost your home, your valuables, your memorabilia or even a loved one. To help you—or a loved one—cope in the aftermath of a tornado, this guide provides information and resources designed to help victims and their families.

Disaster Relief

In the aftermath of a tragedy, there are many pressing issues to take care of, but it is essential that your first priority be your own safety—and that of your loved ones. If you are in need of emergency services (shelter, clothing, food, money, etc.) contact one of the many emergency hotlines listed in the “Emergency Resources” section of this guide. In addition, safeguard yourself and your loved ones by taking the following tips into consideration:

- ◆ Listen to a portable radio for information on shelters, helpful resources and safety advisories.
- ◆ If you are elderly or disabled, contact your city or county government’s emergency information management office for information on shelters for the elderly and those requiring special assistance. Additionally, many local offices keep lists of people with disabilities so they can be located quickly in a sudden emergency.
- ◆ Be alert for additional tornadoes. (“Spin-off” storms are common.)
- ◆ Stay out of and away from damaged buildings. If you have to evacuate, return home only when authorities say it is safe.

Bob and Katie, residents of Oklahoma, say, “Our home was severely damaged when a tornado struck just days ago. We lost everything and we’re happy to be alive, but where can we turn for help?”

- ◆ If you have children or grandchildren with you, make sure they are constantly supervised.
- ◆ Be alert for potential hazards. Take extreme care when moving in an area damaged by a tornado. It is possible that shattered glass, splintered wood or other sharp objects will be strewn around.
- ◆ Cooperate with authorities. Whether you’re asked to relinquish telephone lines, keep off emergency roads or given other directions, do your best to comply.
- ◆ Use caution when traveling. Major storms can create weakened roads or bridges, broken or downed live power lines. If you are elderly or disabled and need assistance with transportation, contact your city or county government’s emergency management information office.
- ◆ Be cautious with food. When electricity is out, refrigerated foods can spoil quickly; throw out any food that is questionable. Frozen foods will typically last in a closed freezer for several days.
- ◆ Be cautious with drinking water. Tornadoes can cause contamination to local reservoirs. Radio reports will typically notify residents if your water is safe to drink. Try to drink bottled water until you know for sure. On average, you need one gallon of water per person per day. (*Tip*—you can obtain safe water by melting ice cubes.)

Caring for Yourself

Disasters such as this can result in extreme emotions including stress, helplessness, fear, irritability, anger and depression. You may also suffer from nightmares, shock, loss of appetite and the inability to concentrate. All of these reactions and feelings are normal; but if you do not address them, you can jeopardize your health. If you or a loved one are unable to cope, do not hesitate to get help. Many temporary shelters offer free counseling services to victims—or referrals to professionals who can provide further assistance. Also, check the “Emergency Resources” section at the end of this guide for more resources.

In addition, consider the following tips:

- ◆ Learn to pay attention to your feelings and respond to your needs—even if you just need time alone to cry.
- ◆ Have realistic expectations and goals, and be patient with yourself.
- ◆ Reach out to supportive friends and family for comfort and guidance.
- ◆ Be patient and give yourself plenty of time to recover and rest.
- ◆ Try to maintain a nutritious diet to keep your energy up.
- ◆ Focus on your breathing—deep, slow breaths will help calm you.
- ◆ Join a support group. You can find support groups through your doctor, listed in your local newspaper or through local Red Cross chapters.
- ◆ If you work, check with your employer, as they may offer benefits to assist with natural disasters, stress, and more.

If you are elderly or have special needs, you may require additional help and coping skills. Rely on trusted friends or neighbors for support or seek help from health care workers, professionals or city management emergency workers.

What To Do If Your Home Is Damaged or Destroyed

When assessing the damage to your home, use extreme caution. Watch for hidden dangers: falling structures, sharp metal, fires and other potential hazards. The following tips may help:

- ◆ If you smell gas or hear a blowing or hissing noise, you may have a gas leak. In this case, open a window and quickly leave. Turn off the gas at the outside main valve, if possible, and call the gas company from a neighbor’s telephone or a pay phone. *Note*—If you turn off the gas, it must be turned back on by a professional.
- ◆ Clean up spilled medicines, bleaches, gasoline or other flammable liquids immediately.
- ◆ If you see sparks or broken or frayed wires, or if you smell hot insulation, call an electrician. You may need to turn off the electricity at the main fuse box or circuit breaker; however, if there is a lot of water on the ground, this may be hazardous, so have an electrician do it for you.
- ◆ If you suspect sewage lines are damaged, avoid using toilets and call a plumber. If water pipes are damaged, contact the water company and avoid using water from the tap.
- ◆ Consider hiring a reliable contractor—but beware of frauds who prey on disaster victims. Your best bet is to get a reference from friends, neighbors or co-workers who have had home improvement work done. Get written estimates from several firms. Ask for explanations in price variations. Don’t automatically choose the lowest bidder. Be sure to get a signed contract from any contractor you agree to work with.
- ◆ If you live in an assisted living facility or retirement facility, the director should advise you of any damage and what steps, if any, you will need to take.

Home Owner's and Renter's Insurance

If you have insurance, make a detailed list of the damages and contact your insurance representative as soon as possible. If you aren't able to call from home, tell your agent where you can be reached—and try to be patient. Where there is extensive and widespread damage, insurance representatives usually handle claims on an as-needed basis, beginning with the most serious situations.

Property insurance typically protects against the financial loss due to damages incurred to real and/or personal property, but policies vary, and many have exclusions. Therefore, it is important to read your policy carefully and contact your agent with specific questions about coverage or the claims process.

If Your Home Is Damaged:

- ◆ Take pictures of the damage—both to the house and its contents—for insurance purposes.
- ◆ Make temporary repairs to prevent further damage from rain, wind or looting. If windows are broken, nail boards or staple-gun heavy plastic or tarps in their place.
- ◆ Keep all repair receipts for your insurance agent.

Helping Children Cope

Natural disasters are stressful for everyone, but children may need extra help coping. A child's reaction will vary depending on his or her personality and age. Infants may become more irritable or fearful. Toddlers and preschoolers will probably feel frightened, insecure or helpless, and may display regressive behavior such as clinginess or separation anxiety. School-aged children may become preoccupied or fearful and experience stress-related physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches. And preteens and teenagers may feel

invincible, display reckless behavior, withdraw, or become hostile. Since children do not have the same coping skills as adults, they will need your love, support, guidance and reassurance.

The following tips may help you help children affected by a tornado:

- ◆ Answer any questions with simple, honest, accurate answers. If you don't know the answer, say that you will try to find out.
- ◆ Talk about your own fears and stresses so children understand, but do not unnecessarily scare them with too many details.
- ◆ Don't make false promises; instead, set realistic goals.
- ◆ Make time for children and pay extra attention to their needs.
- ◆ If you are in a shelter, reassure children that your situation will be temporary.
- ◆ Encourage children to play (in safe areas).
- ◆ Maintain regular routines if at all possible. For example, even in a shelter, you can still have a bedtime routine such as reading or story-telling before children go to sleep.

Safeguarding Yourself From Future Tornadoes

To protect yourself, your loved ones and your home from future disasters, consider taking some proactive steps now. If you are rebuilding your home, check local building codes and ordinances to find out about wind-resistant designs and reinforced masonry work that may help reduce the damaging effects of tornadoes in the future. The Red Cross and other organizations may also be able to provide safety tips that can help prepare your family in the event of future emergencies.

Emergency Resources

After a disaster such as a tornado, shelters are usually set up (in churches, schools, etc.) to provide food, shelter, first aid—and possibly counseling to those affected. To find the shelter nearest you, check your local newspaper, contact your local Red Cross chapter or emergency management service or call one the hotlines below. In addition, some of these organizations may be able to provide temporary housing or financial aid to those who have lost their homes.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

800-621-FEMA (800-621-3362)

<http://www.fema.gov>

Red Cross Hotline

800-REDCROSS (800-733-2767)

<http://www.redcross.org>

The Salvation Army

615 Slaters Lane

P.O. Box 269

Alexandria, VA 22313

703-684-5500

<http://www.salvationarmyusa.org>

Note—For those who would like to help, these organizations are always seeking volunteers and donations (food, clothing, baby formula and diapers—and financial aid). As needs vary by location and continually change in the days following natural disasters, it is best to call these agencies for a list of specific needs before you make a donation or to see how volunteers are needed.

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