**For Extension Agents After a Disaster: Helping others and yourself**

Based on the work of Monica McConkey, Eyes on the Horizon Consulting LLC

To see her training on this topic, go to the recording[**here**](file:///\\msmyid.uga.edu\ifs\ssw\home\amscheye\Rural%20GA%20projects\Behavioral%20Health%20Team\•%09https:\www.zoomgov.com\rec\share\9g5XIVdaUF8ZwPi74W1zavbun8_AZlex_dd84u9d8Cp5c-5QjQZ0QNfkGFywwqy_.hXksSQuhSjgqQYip%3fstartTime=1730309714000), Passcode: $njCyjy9

After a disaster like a tornado or hurricane Extension agents are called on to help many who need assistance in the community--producers, families, children, others. Agents provide valuable information and can help community members start the hard work of assessing and rebuilding.

As agents do this difficult work, two things are important to remember: 1) someone who has lived through a disaster has experienced trauma, which will affect how they think and feel; and 2) the work of helping someone after a disaster is really hard, and can affect you deeply as well.

**After a Disaster**

After a disaster people can have lots of strong emotions that swing quickly, have confusion and memory problems, and have ongoing stress “flight or fight” response. Extension agents can interact with people after a disaster in ways that help them feel safe and keep functioning. Below are some ideas that may help.

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| After a Disaster People Experience… | It Helps if You Can… |
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| Hopeless | Be hopeful without making promises you can’t keep or providing trite comfort words. |
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| Confusion | Keep your communication simple. Rep4eat yourself, and check to make sure people understand. |
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| Memory Problems | Explain things verbally, and also give all information in writing. Expect people to lose things—papers, keys, etc.—and not to remember conversations. |
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| “Fight of Flight” Response | Be calm and move slowly. Don’t startle people. Keep the environment peaceful. |
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| Emotion Swings | Not personalize when people spill their emotions on you. Stay calm and firm. Practice empathy and active listening. |

**Compassion Fatigue**

Compassion fatigue is very real—helping people in distress is exhausting and emotionally draining. “Compassion fatigue” is a state that some helpers experience where they feel tension and preoccupation with the suffering and problems of those being helped to such a level that it causes secondary traumatic distress for them.

***Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue***

You don’t have to have all of these symptoms to have compassion fatigue; if you recognize a number of them you may want to get informal or formal support.

Here are some symptoms of compassion fatigue.

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| Exhaustion | Intrusive images or dissociating/zoning out |
| Lower ability to feel sympathy and empathy | Overly sensitive or not at all sensitive to emotional material |
| Anger and irritability | Hard time separating work and personal life |
| Increased use of alcohol and drugs | Missing work, taking lots of sick days |
| Dread working with certain people | Having a hard time making decisions |
| Lower sense of enjoying your job | Problems with personal relationships |
| High anxiety or ungrounded fears | Problems with physical health, sleeping, appetite |

***How to Help Compassion Fatigue***

The good news is there are ways to heal from, or (better yet) reduce the risk of compassion fatigue. The most important first steps are to acknowledge that you are feeling this way, and understand that compassion fatigue is normal. It doesn’t mean you are weak or incapable—it means you’re human, you’re doing a hard job, and you need a little support.

Do some of these things to help with compassion fatigue.

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| Find someone to talk with—a counselor, faith leader, trusted friend | If possible, take some time off—if not, take breaks during the day |
| Get enough sleep | Exercise and eat properly |
| Develop interests outside of your job—don’t let your job be all-consuming | Remember the things that are important to you and focus on them |