

# Managing in Tough Times



## FINDING MEANING IN ADVERSITY

Almost anyone who has experienced crisis has broached the question, at least mentally, of “why?” Why did this have to happen? What did I do to deserve this? These questions are part of the normal process of grief. With any type of loss, be it the loss of a loved one, a beloved pet or a way of life, we experience grief. While we seldom have the answers, the ability to make meaning or sense of adversity provides us with some degree of optimism and/or consideration of a future beyond the current status. Families and individuals who respond positively to adversity can become resilient.

**Understanding what you are feeling can help you to begin to cope. Grief is human and inescapable. Understanding the stages of grief, giving into them and going through them, is key to getting past the disaster and moving forward.**

### The stages of grief are:

- **Denial**
- **Anger**
- **Bargaining**
- **Depression**
- **Acceptance**

**Denial:** “No, not me, it can’t be true.” This is a typical reaction when a person faces a loss. This stage functions as a buffer after the unexpected happens. It allows you to collect yourself and, in time, to find a way to cope.

**Anger:** “Why me?” When the first stage of denial passes, it is likely to be replaced by anger, rage, envy and resentment. God is often a target for anger, especially in natural disasters. You may also resent people around you who didn’t suffer as much loss as you did.

**Bargaining:** “Yes, me, but....” Once you have gotten the anger under control, you may enter the bargaining stage. You may promise God that you’ll be good or that you’ll do something in exchange for what you need. Bargaining can be a positive way to deal with stress. Whether you bargain with God, with yourself or with your family, it provides comfort for

things you cannot control. It allows you to “frame” the crisis so you can manage it. Bargaining may help you cope with feelings of sadness without experiencing deep depression. Good bargaining skills allow people to see the bright side of even the most difficult situation.

**Depression:** “There is no hope.” A crisis entails loss, which is followed by sadness. If you are absorbed by the sadness, you can become depressed. Signs of depression include changes in usual eating or sleeping patterns, constant moodiness or irritability, lack of energy, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

**Acceptance:** “It’s all right now.” Once the preceding stages have been completely worked through, you will finally be able to accept what has happened, and you may even be stronger than you were before the disaster occurred.

## SO HOW DO YOU MAKE MEANING OUT OF CRISIS?

Here are some of the tips shared by Louisiana families who have experienced some disasters of recent times.

**Rediscover Relationships.** Find people you can lean on. Finding support is crucial to coping with loss. Often the people who can help you most are your friends and family. But no matter how close these people are to you, they aren’t mind readers. Before they can help, you have to be willing to explain how you feel and what you need. Appreciate those around you. Show others how much you care about them. Communicate.

**Prioritization and Planning.** Develop a plan in case of emergencies like evacuations. Consider where you will go, what you will do and differentiate as a family the merits of necessity versus “wants.” Also plan how you will take care of yourself! After a disaster there is so much to do and so many people to take care of, you can easily minimize the importance of taking care of yourself. But remember, it takes physical and emotional energy to rebuild, and the fact is if you don’t take care of yourself first, if you become physically ill or emotionally unbalanced, you will cause more problems than you’ll fix. Do things to ensure your physical, mental and emotional well-being. When you are emotionally drained, you need a healthy body more than ever. Good health habits can make your emotional recovery faster and easier.



- Get a good night's sleep; don't take daytime naps.
- Eat healthy foods, avoid alcohol, caffeine and junk foods.
- Exercise even if it is just taking a walk every day.

Just as bodies need nourishment, minds need rejuvenating. This is why it is important to treat yourself to activities you enjoy.

**Reappraisal.** Make a list of the positives in your life rather than the negatives.

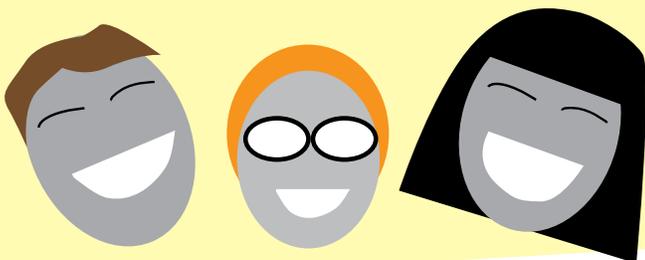
- Do fun things with your family.
- Once a day do something by yourself that you find relaxing.
- Spend time with friends.

**General Acceptance.** The often overused phrase "it is what it is" has merit in coming to terms with a crisis. Whether falling back on contemporary clichés or old adages, once individuals and families accept that some things are beyond their control, the acceptance has a calming effect. The majority of families surveyed found their faith to be the No. 1 asset in surviving hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

**Optimism.** Pessimists are less inclined to seek the silver lining following adversity. Some of old adages quoted by resilient families indicated their optimism. Pick one or make up your own.

- There is always a light at the end of the tunnel.
- Behind every cloud is a silver lining.
- Take the good with the bad.
- Don't let it beat you down.
- Take one day at a time.
- Pick yourself up by the bootstraps.
- Life is short.

**It's OK to laugh.** Humor can contribute to spiritual growth as it helps people cope with adversity. While being thought of as an aid to heal the emotions of individuals, humor also helps to release chemicals in the body that are important to physical health, as well as mental and spiritual health. Humor has the ability to decrease stress, improve health, lessen pain, improve communication and create more effective home and work environments.



People who survive crises well have common characteristics:

- They have people who stand by them, supported them and give them a sense of hope.
- They understand the magnitude of what they have lost.
- They learn to forgive themselves for their mistakes and for surviving.
- They learn to accept their own good qualities.
- They have given themselves a reason to live.

## DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO IS HAVING TROUBLE COPING?

Many people who have trouble coping with loss need help, but don't reach out for it. In these cases, you, as a friend, neighbor or family member, may want to be assertive in freely giving your help. Perhaps you could:

### Show you care, by words and actions.

Small, kind deeds and sincere affection or concern mean a lot. A friendly arm around a shoulder, a few words of support or an invitation to talk may be appreciated more than you know.

### Help the person accept help.

People who have a hard time working through a loss may brush off offers of assistance and persist in the fantasy that everything is fine. Try to make it easy for them to accept help. Be assertive. Ask, "When can I come over and help out?" or say "I'll be over at 3 o'clock to help you paint the living room."

### Help with everyday tasks.

When a person is feeling disoriented and troubled, just keeping up with the routine demands of life can be too much. Maybe you could cook dinner, do the dishes, care for a child, mow the lawn, cook a meal, clean the house or do the shopping. Don't forget children need attention, too. You may want to take them to the zoo, for a bike ride, a walk in the woods, to a movie or maybe you could just play games together.

### Encourage the survivors to talk.

Talking can release pent-up emotions and clear the way for people to confront their loss. Often people can see their situation more objectively when they talk to those who are willing to listen.

### Be a good listener.

Try to keep your mouth shut and your ears open. Don't advise, analyze or judge the person by saying things like: "Don't be so emotional," or "That's not worth worrying about," or "I think you should.....". Instead say things that encourage the person to keep talking: "Tell me more about that." "How do you feel about that?" "I can see this bothers you." "How can I help you resolve this?" Unfortunately, family

members and friends are often poor listeners, not because they don't care, but because they want to make things better, to give advice, to solve the problem. Instead, follow these rules of good listening. Try not to:

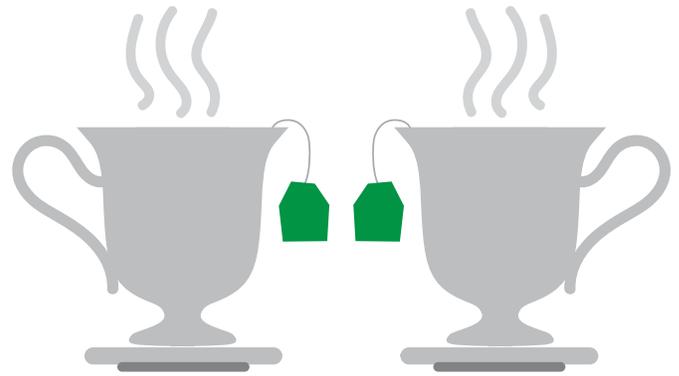
- Draw conclusions
- Pass judgment until you have understood what the other person said
- Change what the other person has said
- Interrupt or change the subject
- Dispute the other person's feelings
- Judge the other person's motives
- Finish thoughts or sentences for the other person
- Do "wishful listening" (hear only what you want to hear)
- Rehearse your response while the other person is talking
- Rush the other person

**Encourage solutions.**

Help the person come up with solutions for the near future and encourage them to work toward those solutions. Help them find the resources to cope. Tell them it is a sign of strength and maturity to accept help. You may have to help them get the help they need by making appointments or going with them once appointments are made.

**Help survivors have fun.**

Suggest doing something you know they like to do and make it easy for them to get out and do it. Make a list of activities you both enjoy; choose one activity you can do together each week.



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