

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Suicide Risk After a Natural Disaster

The aftermath of a natural disaster can significantly impact victims' mental health, leading to an increased risk of suicide that may persist for months following the event.

Ohio is no stranger to the dramatic forces of nature, with extreme weather events ranging from the twisting fury of tornadoes to the overwhelming rush of floods.

The trauma of experiencing a disaster event can increase the risk of suicidal ideations and death by suicide. Several factors contribute to the risk of suicide after a natural disaster, including gender, age, serious mental disorders, loss of family members, low economic status, and injury to oneself or relatives. Women, adolescents, older adults, people with depression and PTSD, and those suffering from low social support are among those highly vulnerable to suicide after natural disasters.¹



(rbeard113/Flickr)

Long-Term Risk

A research project conducted by the University of Delaware revealed suicide rates tend to rise following various disasters, such as severe storms, floods, hurricanes, and ice storms.² The most significant increase in these rates occurs two years after the disaster. Researchers studied the effects of 281 natural disasters on suicide rates over 12 years. They found overall suicide rates increased by 23% compared to rates recorded before and after the disasters.

The lead researcher points out that because the study includes only counties with one disaster from 2003 to 2015, which represents slightly more than 9% of all U.S. counties, the reported rise in the suicide rate is likely underestimated.³

Resources

- **The Disaster Distress Helpline** is the first national hotline dedicated to providing year-round disaster crisis counseling. This toll-free, multilingual, crisis support service is available 24/7 to all residents in the U.S. and its territories who are experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. Call or text 1-800-985-5990
- **FEMA Crisis Counseling Assistance & Training Program**
<https://www.fema.gov/fact-sheet/crisis-counseling-assistance-training-program>
- **SAMHSA: Supplemental Research Bulletin Issue 5: Traumatic Stress and Suicide After Disasters**
https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/dtac/srb_sept2015.pdf

Mental Health Assistance

Offering accessible mental health resources to victims of natural disasters is crucial for their recovery.

Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP) offers financial aid for mental health services in areas with a Presidential disaster declaration that includes Individual Assistance. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Center for Mental Health Services collaborates with FEMA to provide technical assistance and training. This program provides short-term support to disaster survivors, helping them cope, understand their situation, and connect with recovery resources.

Steps for Coping

Here are some suggestions from Mental Health America for taking care of mental health after a natural disaster.

- **Try to get back into a healthy routine** by eating a healthy diet, staying hydrated, exercising, and practicing good sleep hygiene.
- **Find healthy ways to relax**, such as hobbies, to feel some sense of normalcy and release stress.
- **Limit media exposure** to news or images of the disaster, which can increase stress and affect mental wellness.
- **Connect** with family, friends, neighbors, or colleagues for support.
- **Take breaks** to clear the mind and calm down.
- **Honor and grieve losses**, don't suppress or stifle emotions.
- **Get help** from a mental healthcare professional if needed.

References

- 1 Jafari H, Heidari M, Heidari S, Sayfour N. Risk factors for suicidal behaviours after natural disasters: a systematic review. *Malays J Med Sci.* 2020;27(3):20-33. doi:10.21315/mjms2020.27.3.3.
- 2 University of Delaware. Mental health strained by disaster. *ScienceDaily.* November 11, 2020. Available at: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/11/20111144331.htm>. Accessed January 23, 2025.
- 3 Cartier KM. Suicide rates may rise after natural disasters. *Eos.* 2021;102. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1029/2021EO153699>. Published January 26, 2021. Accessed January 23, 2025.

ABOUT

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF) educates, advocates for, and builds connections and support for individuals, families, and communities to prevent suicide.



(614) 429-1528 / OhioSPF.org

