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## Tornado: Understanding the Aftermath

A tornado is a natural disaster that can be traumatic for an individual, a family and a community. Whether a disaster is an act of nature or an act of man, the psychological trauma that can occur can be equally devastating. Experiencing a tornado can result in the loss of home, jobs, income and life as was known. Moving a family and possessions is stressful under the best of circumstances. Experiencing a tornado often results in an unplanned move that is coupled with life threatening or life altering challenges.

Individuals and communities who were directly or indirectly impacted by recent tornados in Indiana may experience immediate and/or long-term reactions. As people become aware of the extent of the disaster and how it will impact their lives for a period of time, the limitations of government assistance and the cost of rebuilding they are likely to experience a wide range of reactions.

### Frequently Occurring Long-term Reactions:

|        |                          |   |
|--------|--------------------------|---|
| Anger  | Physical health problems | Loss of interest in favorite activities |
| Grief  | Depression               | Changes in eating and sleeping patterns |
| Apathy | Feeling out of control   | Difficulty remembering things           |
| Guilt  | Anxiety                  | Relationship difficulties               |
| Fear   | Irritability             | Increase use of alcohol or drugs        |

### Phases of Disaster:

People and communities typically go through different phases in response to a natural disaster. An awareness of these phases may assist in understanding reactions to the tornado. There can be a great deal of variation of how and when these phases are experienced. The following are among the different phases that may be experienced.

**Heroic Phase:** This period usually occurs at the time of the natural disaster and during the time immediately afterwards. Extraordinary or heroic actions occur as individuals save their own and others' lives and property. People and communities expend a great deal of energy to help others survive and recover. There are countless examples of courage, generosity, support and pulling together. People focus on the immediate needs of those who are in danger or at risk. Restoring safety and security is key.

**Honeymoon Phase:** This period typically begins one week after the disaster and may last six months. Individuals who have survived have a strong sense of having shared and lived through a catastrophic experience. People feel supported and encouraged by family, friends and by official agencies who promise assistance. The cleanup process begins with anticipation that more help will be available.

**Disillusionment Phase:** This period may last from two months to two or more years. If promises of aid are not fulfilled as expected, strong feelings of anger, resentment, betrayal, frustration and bitterness may occur. During this period, outside agencies need to leave and local community groups may weaken as

an attempt to return to “normal” occurs. There may be a gradual loss of “shared community” as victims concentrate on rebuilding their own lives. People may start to feel isolated and communities can become divided.

**Reconstruction phase:** This phase generally lasts for several years following a natural disaster. Victims have come to realize the extent to which they need to rebuild their own lives, homes, farms and businesses as they also realize the limitations of the assistance available to them. They gradually assume responsibility for tasks that they may have originally thought others would take care of. Signs of progress are evident in new buildings, construction projects and new programs and plans. These all reaffirm people’s belief in their community and in their own capabilities. Community groups with long-term investment in the community become key elements during this phase. The physical evidence of the disaster gradually disappears.

### What to Expect

As people and communities go through the process of putting their lives and community back together a variety of experiences may add to the reactions that they are already experiencing.

1. Bureaucratic hassles and “red tape” can consume hours, even months after the disaster.
2. Financial losses may lead to worry, depression and change of lifestyle.
3. The approaching fall and winter may lead people to feel pressure to push themselves harder in order to finish reconstruction and repair of damage.
4. Long term stress may result in health problems (headaches, stomach problems, high blood pressure, heart problems, frequent colds and viruses, allergies, changes in emotional behavior).
5. Once the family moves back into their home or into another home they may experience mixed feelings. They may experience feelings of relief and joy as well as sadness and fear. Sadness is usually due to reminders of things lost...both tangible and intangible things. A broad range of reactions is not uncommon
6. Events may cause feelings of sadness during the first year following a disaster. Birthdays, holidays and the anniversary of the event remind people of how things used to be and things that were lost or changed.
7. Family relationships may become strained from all of the stress related to responding to the disaster. People often react differently to an event and these differences often lead to misunderstanding, isolation and hurt. **Relationships need as much attention and care as physical property.**
8. Individuals can become nervous, anxious or irritable in rainy weather. Both children and adults may cry without knowing why, have trouble sleeping or have bad dreams. Children often regress to earlier behavior such as thumb sucking, clinging to their parents or bedwetting.

**What can be done:** Although all of these reactions to a natural disaster and stress are not uncommon, they can create problems that cause more stress. It is also important to remember that some of these reactions may not occur until long after the event. Experiencing these reactions in no way reflects upon the strength of the individual. **Two things are important to remember: everyone reacts differently and there are a variety of things that can be done and resources to tap into to help with reactions. Other handouts are available to assist you in steps you can take to assist the emotional recovery process.**