

Relocation and Stress

Unplanned evacuations can cause great stress on a community and on the individuals involved. Several issues need to be taken into account when working with older adults who may be under stress from the effects of a sudden relocation.

Some *stressful factors* related to sudden evacuations include:

- disruptions of daily life routines,
- separation from family, friends, and coworkers,
- concerns about pets,
- difficulty getting around in a new location.

Things to Keep in Mind...

Communication problems

Some older persons in shelters or in new surroundings may have difficulty:

- understanding family and friends, or
- talking to people or answering questions.

Normal age-related slowing of thinking, problems with seeing and hearing, and reduced ability to physically move because of illnesses or the effects of medications may cause this.

Chronic illness and dietary considerations

Arthritis may prevent an elderly family member from standing in line. Some medications can cause mental confusion or a greater susceptibility to problems such as dehydration. Memory problems can cause communication problems. Neglect of special meal needs in certain illnesses can lead to medical crises.

Worries about loss of independence

Loss of the ability to live independently because of disaster-related injury or loss of home can be the biggest blow that a disaster deals the elderly.

“Welfare” stigma and unfamiliarity with bureaucracy

Older adults may be unwilling to accept government “welfare” assistance because they have always “paid their way.” In repatriation, however, government help may be needed. Their unwillingness to accept help may be made worse by unfamiliarity with government services for which they are eligible, particularly during disasters.

Getting too hot or too cold

Older persons may not handle extremes of heat or cold well. Either too much heat or cold can have marked effects upon them.

Dehydration

Elderly persons are more susceptible to dehydration. They do not feel thirsty as quickly as young people do and do not drink water and other liquids as often. Some of the medicine they take can also lead to water loss.

Signs of stress in the elderly

Under stress, the elderly can:

- Become mentally confused
- Tire easily
- Withdraw from those around them
- In severe cases, undergo personality changes

You should also know that the elderly might tend to complain of bodily symptoms rather than emotional problems when under stress. Again, remember not to dismiss any bodily symptoms as just due to stress.

Senior citizens dealing with change

Remember that elderly persons have the strengths gained from a lifetime of coping with adversity. Know also that elderly people tend to under-report problems, both to family and physicians, as they may want to cope on their own. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to how they feel and act in times of change and relocation.

How to help the elderly deal with stress

In general terms, these principles will help guide you when helping an elderly person deal with the stress of evacuation and relocation:

- Provide strong and persistent verbal reassurance.
- Assist with recovery of physical possessions as is safe.
- If possible, arrange social interactions for elderly social support.
- Help re-establish contact with family and friends if possible.
- Bring in support to manage medication needs and any dietary regimens.

Additional Tips

- Make sure that the elderly person has the eyeglasses they need and that their hearing aid is on before talking to them. Be patient and calm. Speak loudly enough for them to hear you, but do not shout. Keep your messages simple and clear. Repeat information and make sure that the person in your care hears and understands what is said.

- Check new living quarters for accessibility and anything that could lead to a fall, for example, loose throw rugs. Make sure stairs and hallways are well lit and provide walking assistance if needed.
- Make sure the elderly person has a clock and a calendar in their room. If there are any familiar things of theirs, place those in their room. Be sure that there is some soft, non-glaring light in their room and that it is as quiet and calm as possible. If the person cannot be reoriented to where they are and your efforts upset them, just reassure them that things are okay or distract them with other activities.
- Show empathy for the person's situation by listening. Give comfort by your presence and let them know you are there and care for them. Do not minimize what they have lost.
- Within the constraints of the situation, allow them to do what they can for themselves and keep as much dignity and independence as is possible.
- If the older adult receiving assistance is reluctant to accept care due to a perceived age gap or gender of the responder, be open and ask the individual if they would prefer to speak to someone else.
- Check to make sure that your elderly relatives have access to safe, clean drinking water and that they are drinking it. Watch for signs of dehydration, such as sunken eyes, no tears, and dry mouth.

For More Information

- Administration on Aging. Resources for elders and family.
<http://www.aoa.gov>
- National Mental Health Association.
<http://www.nmha.org/finding-help>
- At-Risk Individuals, Behavioral Health & Community Resilience (ABC)
<https://www.phe.gov/Preparedness/planning/abc>