

# **Mental Preparation is an Important Key to Survival and Recovery from Emergencies and Disasters**

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The recent earthquake in Haiti, the foiled Christmas Day terrorist bombing, the H1N1 Flu Virus and your own recent personal emergencies are examples of events that threaten our mental well being. Whether the event has national impact or local individual impact a quick and full recovery from the event hinges on our mental well being. Mental preparation is an effective tool in the recovery process and helps us to develop resiliency. So how does a person mentally prepare for emergencies and disasters?

As a member of Lebanon County's Disaster Crisis Outreach and Referral Team (DCORT) and Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team I completed training in emergency preparedness, disaster and crisis outreach, and stress management in critical incident. I also spent hours studying various government documents on disaster and emergency preparedness. My participation in DCORT and CISM responses provided me with first hand experience and insight into how people react and deal with emergencies and disasters. I used these resources and experiences to develop the following steps to help you with your mental preparation.

**Acceptance** – the biggest barrier to being mentally prepared is refusing to accept that you will be involved in an incident. We seem to think that we are immune to disasters, emergencies, and crisis events. You have to overcome these thoughts as incidents are occurring in our communities and neighborhoods on a daily basis. It is not a question of whether or not it will happen; it is a question of when an incident that involves you will occur. This may sound a bit pessimistic but the reality is that most of us will have the unfortunate experience of dealing with an incident or emergency in our lifetime.

**Prepare** – once we accept the reality of our involvement in an incident, we can begin to prepare for the occurrence of an incident. According to Ready.gov, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) preparedness web site, there are three steps to emergency preparedness: 1) get an emergency supply kit, 2) make a family emergency plan, and 3) be informed. Ready.gov provides you with all the details of these steps. I recommend you visit the site and gather the specific information you need.

These three steps are critical to your mental preparedness. Mental preparedness involves dealing with the stress and the panic that often occur during an incident. So the first thing you want to do is reduce your stress. This can be accomplished through the steps listed above. The emergency supply kit is designed to meet your basic physical needs and minor first aid during the incident and a short period of time after the incident. The more items you include in the kit, the better prepared you will be for dealing with the mental stressors and a potential long term event. The Family Emergency Plan, when prepared and exercised in advance should provide you with some peace of mind regarding your family. One of the key elements of your plan should be a communication chain. An important part of your communication chain is an "ICE" (in case of emergency) phone number. This should be programmed into your cell phone(s) and shared with family members and primary care givers. The "ICE" number will be beneficial to both your family and any first responders that maybe involved in search and rescue operations. The FEMA web site provides an excellent plan template to use for your Emergency Family Plan. The final step, Be Informed, is essential to your mental well being. This step includes knowing your local emergency preparedness plans, resources in your community, types of natural disasters that can occur in your area and how to prepare for each one, the potential for man-made incidents in your area, emergency contact numbers, and the appropriate source of information during an incident.

**Practice** – most of us have heard the adage "practice makes perfect;" practice is important for your family emergency plan. The more familiar you are with your plan and the success of the plan, the less stress and panic you will experience in an actual emergency or incident. Practicing your plan will help you to work out any bugs in the plan and identify areas for improvement or expansion.

**Follow-up** – once the incident has been resolved, follow up with your family and friends. Talk about what happened and determine if you need additional help to get back to your normal routine. It is important for you to return to your normal routine as soon as possible. There may be some issues that you can't resolve by yourself, so ask for help.

Reducing panic is a more difficult task. Panic can be a physical or emotional response to the incident. There are times when you have no option but to fight or flee, a type of panic response. Most of us have various responses to panic. In my life I found that planning for events has helped me to reduce my panic response. You have to work at controlling you panic response. This is difficult because most of us do not experience panic on a regular basis. In my DCORT training we used videos of incidents to help us develop our assessment skills. As I watched several of the videos, I asked myself how would I react if I was in the middle of this particular incident. This has helped me to plan my response to incidents. I have also found that by participating in emergency preparedness exercises has helped me to reduce my panic response. No, I don't expect everyone to sign up for DCORT training to help to reduce their panic response. My recommendation is to do everything you can to be prepared for an emergency as preparedness is a way to reduce panic and practice your family emergency plan.

The next column will be the first in a series of columns on good mental health.

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