



News Release

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FEMA News Desk: 877-434-4084
NJOEM PIO Contact: 609-963-6818

DISASTER STRESS AND OLDER ADULTS

TRENTON, N.J. – Many survivors of Hurricane Sandy find themselves under additional stress these days. But disaster-related anxiety can be especially high in older adults, particularly those living on their own or isolated from friends and family.

Because of their age and other unique circumstances, older adults often react much differently than younger people to catastrophic events. It's not uncommon after a disaster for them to become withdrawn, agitated, disoriented and confused.

Family members, friends, neighbors and caregivers should be aware of this and be ready to safeguard both their physical *and* mental health. Be on the lookout for the following symptoms of senior stress:

- Fear of losing their independence because of disaster-related injury or loss of their residence. This can be the biggest trauma that older people face after a disaster.
- Problems talking to people and answering questions. Difficulties in communicating after a disaster can be increased by factors such as slower thought processes related to age, problems with seeing and hearing, and reduced mobility.
- “Welfare” stigma. Many older adults are cautious about or even unwilling to accept government help because they have always “paid their way.” Their reluctance to accept assistance can be compounded by a lack of knowledge about government services for which they may be eligible.
- Memories or flashbacks of other events in their lives when they were traumatized or suffered severe losses.
- Anxiety caused by poor reading skills and inadequate command of the English language.
- Worry about limited financial resources and having enough time to rebuild their homes.
- Fear of being put in an institution because they cannot return to a home that was destroyed by the disaster.
- Withdrawal and isolation from family and friends.
- In severe cases, seniors also may undergo personality changes in the wake of a disaster.

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Because older people may be on medication for health conditions, it's important to ensure they are medically stable before deciding that any of the above symptoms are due to emotional stress.

It's also important to keep in mind that seniors have decades of experience and strengths gained from facing previous disasters and adversity.

Those who live or work with older adults who have been adversely affected by Hurricane Sandy can take a number of steps to monitor and improve their mental health:

- Provide consistent verbal reassurance.
- Assist them in recovering personal possessions.
- Help them re-establish contact with their family, friends and social networks.
- Help them find a suitable residential relocation until they can return to their own home, ideally in familiar surroundings with friends or acquaintances.
- Make frequent home visits and arrange for others to visit them.
- Ensure medical and financial assistance.
- Provide transportation to the doctor, grocery store, etc.
- Re-establish and monitor their nutritional and medication needs.

Older people or their family and friends seeking additional information about stress counseling and services should contact their local mental health agencies. The New Jersey Department of Human Services is coordinating statewide efforts to help individuals and communities manage the emotional impact of the storm. Crisis counselors are currently providing support and assisting in FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers as needed.

In addition to providing face-to-face disaster crisis counseling, the state provides informational materials about coping, and it has partnered with the Mental Health Association in New Jersey to offer assistance through a toll free helpline: **877-294-4357** (also applies for VRS or 711-Relay users) or **TTY 877-294-4356**. More information about disaster-related stress can be found at the website: www.state.nj.us/humanservices/dmhs/disaster/.

POSSIBLE PHOTOS: See following pages

POSSIBLE VIDEOS: The FEMA Video Library contains one video on "seniors" and related search terms, but it's about a meeting at a senior center in Texas rather than a generic "FEMA and Seniors" video. http://www.fema.gov/medialibrary/media_records/302

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Seaside Heights, N.J., Nov. 12, 2012 -- A Red Cross volunteer gives food to Hurricane Sandy survivors in Seaside Heights, N.J., who were allowed to spend a few hours at their homes to retrieve their possessions. Seaside Heights, like other New Jersey coastal towns, was devastated when Hurricane Sandy swept through the area. Photo by Patsy Lynch/FEMA

Red Cross provides assistance for Hurricane Sandy survivors (ID: 60611)
http://www.fema.gov/photolibrary/photo_details.do?id=60611

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Sea Bright, N.J., Nov. 11, 2012 -- FEMA Community Relations team member Diane McKinnis talks with resident Jack Bodinghouse to ensure that he is getting the assistance from FEMA that he needs after Hurricane Sandy destroyed much of the island and flooded his home. Photo by Liz Roll/FEMA

Community Relations Specialists speak with Sandy Survivors (ID: 60564)

http://www.fema.gov/photolibrary/photo_details.do?id=60564

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Middlesex, N.J., Nov. 10, 2012 -- Tony Faison, Community Relations (CR) specialist, assists a Hurricane Sandy survivor at a Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) in Middlesex, NJ. FEMA is working with local, state and other federal agencies to provide assistance to hurricane survivors. Photo by Patsy Lynch/FEMA

FEMA Community Relations Specialists assist residents in New Jersey (ID: 60443)

http://www.fema.gov/photolibrary/photo_details.do?id=60443

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