

Coping After a Tornado

Tornadoes are one of the most traumatic of natural disasters to experience. They usually occur suddenly, with little or no warning, and can leave you dealing with losses of all kinds. You may have lost your home, your valuables, your memorabilia or even a loved one. To help you—or a loved one—cope in the aftermath of a tornado, this guide provides information and resources designed to help victims and their families.

Disaster Relief

In the aftermath of a tragedy, there are many pressing issues to take care of, but it is essential that your first priority be your own safety—and that of your loved ones. If you are in need of emergency services (shelter, clothing, food, money, etc.) contact one of the many emergency hotlines listed in the “Emergency Resources” section of this guide. In addition, safeguard yourself and your loved ones by taking the following tips into consideration:

- Listen to a portable radio or other reliable news source for information on safety advisories, shelters and helpful resources.
- If you are elderly or disabled, contact your city or county government’s emergency information management office for information on shelters for the elderly and those requiring special assistance. Additionally, many local offices keep lists of people with disabilities so they can be located quickly in a sudden emergency.
- Be alert for additional tornadoes. (“Spin-off” storms are common.)

Bob and Katie, residents of Oklahoma, say, “Our home was severely damaged when a tornado struck just days ago. We lost everything and we’re happy to be alive, but where can we turn for help?”

- Stay out of and away from damaged buildings. If you have to evacuate, return home only when authorities say it is safe.
- If you have children or grandchildren with you, make sure they are constantly supervised.
- Cooperate with authorities. Whether you’re asked to stay off the telephone except to report emergencies, keep off emergency roads or given other directions, do your best to comply.
- Be alert for potential hazards. Take extreme care when moving in an area damaged by a tornado. It is possible that shattered glass, splintered wood or other sharp objects will be strewn around. Wear sturdy shoes or boots, long sleeves and gloves when handling or walking on or near debris.
- Use caution when traveling. Tornadoes can create weakened roads or bridges, broken or downed live power lines. Do not touch downed power lines or objects in contact with downed lines. Report electrical hazards to the police and the utility company.
- If you are elderly or disabled and need assistance with transportation, contact your city or county government’s emergency management information office.

- Be cautious with food. When electricity is out, refrigerated foods can spoil quickly; throw out any food that is questionable. Frozen foods will typically last in a closed freezer for several days.
- Be cautious with drinking water. Tornadoes can cause contamination to local reservoirs. Radio reports will typically notify residents if your water is safe to drink. Try to drink bottled water until you know for sure. On average, you need one gallon of water per person per day. (*Tip*—you can obtain safe water by melting ice cubes.)
- Use battery-powered lanterns, if possible, rather than candles to light homes without electrical power. If you use candles, make sure they are in safe holders away from curtains, paper, wood or other flammable items. Never leave a candle burning when you are out of the room.
- Never use generators, pressure washers, grills, camp stoves or other gasoline, propane, natural gas or charcoal-burning devices inside your home, basement, garage or camper—or even outside near an open window, door or vent. Carbon monoxide (CO)—an odorless, colorless gas that can cause sudden illness and death if you breathe it—from these sources can build up in your home, garage or camper and poison the people and animals inside. Seek prompt medical attention if you suspect CO poisoning and are feeling dizzy, light-headed or nauseated.

Caring for Yourself

Disasters such as this can result in extreme emotions including stress, helplessness, fear, irritability, anger and depression. You may also suffer from nightmares, shock, loss of appetite and the inability to concentrate. All of these reactions and feelings are normal; but if you do not address them, you can jeopardize your health. If you or a loved one are unable to cope, do not hesitate to get help. Many temporary shelters offer free counseling services to victims—or referrals to professionals who can provide further assistance. Also, check the “Emergency Resources” section at the end of this guide for more resources.

In addition, consider the following tips:

- Learn to pay attention to your feelings and respond to your needs—even if you just need time alone to cry.
- Have realistic expectations and goals, and be patient with yourself.
- Reach out to supportive friends and family for comfort and guidance.
- Be patient and give yourself plenty of time to recover and rest.
- Try to maintain a nutritious diet to keep your energy up.
- Focus on your breathing—deep, slow breaths will help calm you.
- Join a support group. You can find support groups through your doctor, listed in your local newspaper or through local Red Cross chapters.
- If you work, check with your employer, as they may offer benefits to assist with natural disasters, stress, and more.

If you are elderly or have special needs, you may require additional help and coping skills. Rely on trusted friends or neighbors for support or seek help from health care workers, professionals or city management emergency workers.

What To Do If Your Home Is Damaged or Destroyed

When assessing the damage to your home, use extreme caution. Watch for hidden dangers: falling structures, sharp metal, fires and other potential hazards. The following tips may help:

- Wear sturdy shoes or boots, long sleeves and gloves.
- Learn proper safety procedures and operating instructions before operating any gas-powered or electric-powered saws or tools.
- Be aware of possible structural, electrical or gas-leak hazards in your home. Contact your local city or county building inspectors for information on structural safety codes and standards. They may also offer suggestions on finding a qualified contractor to do work for you.

- In general, if you suspect any damage to your home, shut off electrical power, natural gas and propane tanks to avoid fire, electrocution or explosions.
- If you smell gas or hear a blowing or hissing noise, you may have a gas leak. Do not turn on the lights, light matches, smoke or do anything that could cause a spark. Open a window and quickly leave. Turn off the gas at the outside main valve, if possible. Notify the gas company, the police or fire departments, or State Fire Marshal's office. Do not return to your house until you are told it is safe to do so.. *Note*—If you turn off the gas, it must be turned back on by a professional.
- If it is dark when you are inspecting your home, use a flashlight rather than a candle or torch to avoid the risk of fire or explosion in a damaged home.
- Clean up spilled medicines, bleaches, gasoline or other flammable liquids immediately.
- If you see sparks or broken or frayed wires, or if you smell hot insulation, call an electrician. You may need to turn off the electricity at the main fuse box or circuit breaker; however, if there is a lot of water on the ground, this may be hazardous, so have an electrician do it for you.
- If you suspect sewage lines are damaged, avoid using toilets and call a plumber. If water pipes are damaged, contact the water company and avoid using water from the tap.
- Consider hiring a reliable contractor—but beware of frauds who prey on disaster victims. Your best bet is to get a reference from friends, neighbors or co-workers who have had home improvement work done. Get written estimates from several firms. Ask for explanations in price variations. Don't automatically choose the lowest bidder. Be sure to get a signed contract from any contractor you agree to work with.
- If you live in an assisted living facility or retirement facility, the director should advise you of any damage and what steps, if any, you will need to take.

Home Owner's and Renter's Insurance

If you have insurance, make a detailed list of the damages and contact your insurance representative as soon as possible. If you aren't able to call from home, tell your agent where you can be reached—and try to be patient. Where there is extensive and widespread damage, insurance representatives usually handle claims on an as-needed basis, beginning with the most serious situations.

Property insurance typically protects against the financial loss due to damages incurred to real and/or personal property, but policies vary, and many have exclusions. Therefore, it is important to read your policy carefully and contact your agent with specific questions about coverage or the claims process.

If Your Home Is Damaged:

- **Take pictures of the damage—both to the house and its contents—for insurance purposes.**
- **Make temporary repairs to prevent further damage from rain, wind or looting. If windows are broken, nail boards or staple-gun heavy plastic or tarps in their place.**
- **Keep all repair receipts for your insurance agent.**

Helping Children Cope

Natural disasters are stressful for everyone, but children may need extra help coping. A child's reaction will vary depending on his or her personality and age. Infants may become more irritable or fearful. Toddlers and preschoolers will probably feel frightened, insecure or helpless, and may display regressive behavior such as clinginess or separation anxiety. School-aged children may become preoccupied or fearful and experience stress-related physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches. And preteens and teenagers may feel invincible, display reckless behavior, withdraw, or become hostile.

Since children do not have the same coping skills as adults, they will need your love, support, guidance and reassurance.

The following tips may help you help children affected by a tornado:

- Answer any questions with simple, honest, accurate answers. If you don't know the answer, say that you will try to find out.
- Talk about your own fears and stresses so children understand, but do not unnecessarily scare them with too many details.
- Don't make false promises; instead, set realistic goals.
- Make time for children and pay extra attention to their needs.
- If you are in a shelter, reassure children that your situation will be temporary.
- Encourage children to play (in safe areas).
- Maintain regular routines if at all possible. For example, even in a shelter, you can still have a bedtime routine such as reading or story-telling before children go to sleep.

Safeguarding Yourself From Future Tornadoes

To protect yourself, your loved ones and your home from future disasters, consider taking some proactive steps now. If you are rebuilding your home, check local building codes and ordinances to find out about wind-resistant designs and reinforced masonry work that may help reduce the damaging effects of tornadoes in the future. Consider the following safety tips to help protect yourself and your loved ones.

Know the Plans

Learn about the risks, emergency plans and alert systems that have been established in your area by your state and local authorities.

Know the Terms

Familiarize yourself with these terms to help identify a tornado hazard:

- **Tornado Watch**—Tornadoes are possible. Remain alert for approaching storms. Watch the sky and stay tuned to NOAA Weather Radio or commercial news outlets for information.
- **Tornado Warning**—A tornado has been sighted or indicated by weather radar. Take shelter immediately.

During a Tornado

If you are under a tornado warning, seek shelter immediately! Most injuries associated with high winds are from flying debris, so remember to protect your head.

If you are in a structure (e.g. residence, small building, school, nursing home, hospital, factory, shopping center, high-rise building):

- Go to a pre-designated shelter area such as a safe room, basement, storm cellar, or the lowest building level. If there is no basement, go to the center of an interior room on the lowest level (closet, interior hallway) away from corners, windows, doors, and outside walls. Put as many walls as possible between you and the outside. Get under a sturdy table and use your arms to protect your head and neck.
- In a high-rise building, go to a small interior room or hallway on the lowest floor possible.
- Put on sturdy shoes.
- Do not open windows.
- If you are in a trailer or mobile home:
 - Get out immediately and go to the lowest floor of a sturdy, nearby building or a storm shelter. Mobile homes, even if tied down, offer little protection from tornadoes.

If you are outside with no shelter:

- Immediately get into a vehicle, buckle your seat belt and try to drive to the closest sturdy shelter.
- If your vehicle is hit by flying debris while you are driving, pull over and park.

- Stay in the car with the seat belt on. Put your head down below the windows; cover your head with your hands and a blanket, coat or other cushion if possible.
- If you can safely get noticeably lower than the level of the roadway, leave your car and lie in that area, covering your head with your hands
- Do not get under an overpass or bridge. You are safer in a low, flat location.
- Never try to outrun a tornado in urban or congested areas in a car or truck. Instead, leave the vehicle immediately for safe shelter.
- Watch out for flying debris. Flying debris from tornadoes causes most fatalities and injuries.

Build a Safe Room

Extreme windstorms in many parts of the country pose a serious threat to buildings and their occupants. Your residence may be built “to code” but that does not mean it can withstand winds from extreme events such as tornadoes and major hurricanes. The purpose of a safe room or a wind shelter is to provide a space where you and your family can seek refuge that provides a high level of protection. You can build a safe room in one of several places in your home.

- Your basement
- Atop a concrete slab-on-grade foundation or garage floor.
- An interior room on the first floor.

Safe rooms built below ground level provide the greatest protection, but a safe room built in a first-floor interior room also can provide the necessary protection. Below-ground safe rooms must be designed to avoid accumulating water during the heavy rains that often accompany severe windstorms.

Emergency Resources

After a disaster such as a tornado, shelters are usually set up (in churches, schools, etc.) to provide food, shelter, first aid—and possibly counseling to those affected. To find the shelter nearest you, check your local newspaper, contact your local Red Cross chapter or emergency management service or call one the hotlines below. In addition, some of these organizations may be able to provide temporary housing or financial aid to those who have lost their homes.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
800-621-FEMA (800-621-3362)
www.fema.gov

Red Cross Hotline
800-REDCROSS (800-733-2767)
www.redcross.org

The Salvation Army
615 Slaters Lane
P.O. Box 269
Alexandria, VA 22313
703-684-5500
www.salvationarmyusa.org

Note—For those who would like to help, these organizations are always seeking volunteers and donations (food, clothing, baby formula and diapers—and financial aid). As needs vary by location and continually change in the days following natural disasters, it is best to call these agencies for a list of specific needs before you make a donation or to see how volunteers are needed.

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