



FOX VALLEY RECOVERY LIBRARY

Going Forward

The Emotional Recovery Journey After a Disaster

EVERGREEN EMOTIONAL RECOVERY GUIDE

Updated August 2026

Time is part of recovery

One resource no one can give another person during recovery is more time. But we can give one another room to use the time we have.

Begin where you are. Honor your process. Honor theirs. Keep going forward.

FoxValleyRecovery.org

About this guide

Disaster recovery is easy to see when it looks like debris, damaged homes, insurance claims, temporary housing, cleanup crews, and repairs. Some of recovery is much less visible.

People are recovering too.

A disaster can interrupt routines, relationships, plans, familiar places, and the ordinary assumptions that made yesterday feel ordinary. People who lived through the same event may respond very differently, and those responses may change over time. There is no single correct emotional path after a disaster.

This guide is for people directly affected by disaster, the families and friends beside them, neighbors trying to help, and volunteers giving their time and energy to a recovering community.

The central idea

Honor your process. Honor theirs. You do not have to recover according to somebody else's timetable. Neither does the person beside you.

How to use this guide

Read what is useful now. Leave what is not. Return later if something becomes relevant.

The practices in this guide are offered as possibilities, not prescriptions. You will see language such as "you could try," "some people find," and "if it feels comfortable." No breathing exercise, routine, grounding practice, conversation, walk, journal, or other tool works the same way for every person.

Important health and safety limitation

This guide provides general educational information about emotional recovery and stress after disaster. It does not diagnose or treat a medical or mental-health condition and is not a substitute for medical care, mental-health care, crisis care, legal advice, or other qualified professional guidance.

Your recovery is not a test you have to pass.

If something in this guide does not feel useful to you, leave it.

1. Begin where you are

Not where somebody else is.

Not where you think you should be.

Not where you were before the disaster.

Where you are today.

After a disaster, people may notice changes in sleep, concentration, energy, appetite, patience, mood, or their sense of safety. Some people feel anxious or sad. Some become irritable. Some feel exhausted or emotionally numb. Some want to talk constantly. Others do not want to talk about the event at all.

And some people may be surprised by how normal they feel.

Different does not mean wrong

Strong reactions after a disaster do not by themselves tell you whether you have a mental-health condition. Reactions can vary greatly from person to person and can change over time.

One household may have lost nearly everything. Another may have suffered comparatively little physical damage but experienced fear, disruption, financial strain, or a profound change in how safe home feels.

Someone may be grateful that their family is safe and still grieve what was lost. Someone may know others had it worse and still be struggling. Someone else may be ready to laugh, work, rebuild, or move forward sooner than the people around them.

There is no need to rank pain before allowing it to matter.

You do not have to manufacture a reaction

- You do not need to cry because someone thinks you should.
- You do not need to tell the story repeatedly.
- You do not need to feel grateful every moment because things could have been worse.
- You do not need to discover a lesson or "stay strong."
- You do not need to remain visibly affected in order to prove that what happened mattered.

A simple place to begin

When everything feels too large, you could ask:

- What needs my attention today?
- What can wait?
- What is within my control?
- Who might help with what is not?

One day of recovery does not need to contain the entire recovery.

2. Time is part of recovery

There is no standard schedule for emotional recovery after disaster. Reactions may ease, return, change, or appear after the immediate emergency has passed. Reminders can also bring feelings back unexpectedly.

Reminders can be ordinary things

A reminder might be...	And it may arrive later
• A weather warning or siren • A particular sound or smell • Driving past a damaged place • Insurance paperwork	• An approaching anniversary • Another storm • Someone else's story • A difficult day after several good ones

A difficult day does not mean you are back at the beginning.

Recovery is not measured by a perfectly smooth line.

Time cannot be donated

Neighbors can bring food. Volunteers can clear debris. Friends can help with children or transportation. Professionals can offer knowledge and care. Organizations can help solve practical problems.

But nobody can hand another person three months of healing.

Time cannot be rushed. Time cannot be standardized.

What people around you can give is room - room to think, stop, decide later, grieve, feel fine, or change your mind.

Going forward is not forgetting

Recovery does not require recreating an untouched version of life from before the event. There is no road back to a moment in which the disaster had never happened. There is a road forward.

Going forward does not mean approving of what happened. It does not mean forgetting. It does not mean finding a hidden purpose in suffering. It does not require turning loss into inspiration.

Begin where life is now.

Going forward simply means life continues from where you are now.

3. Give yourself some room

The days after disaster can create extraordinary decision pressure: insurance calls, repair estimates, cleanup, work, school, housing, family questions, volunteers, forms, messages, and people asking what you want to do next.

Sometimes the most useful response is not another decision. It is a pause.

Not everything belongs to today

When immediate safety and essential needs are handled, you could ask whether a decision actually has to be made now. Some things require immediate action. Others become safer and clearer when there is time to verify, think, and understand the choice.

You may be allowed to say:

- "Not today."
- "I need to think about that."
- "Please leave that there for now."
- "I want to talk with my family first."
- "We've done enough for today."
- "Thank you, but I need some space."

A boundary does not erase gratitude. A pause does not mean you are refusing recovery.

Make the next thing smaller

Instead of asking, "How do I recover from all of this?" try asking, "What is the next thing that actually needs doing?"

One manageable thing	Then decide what comes next
• Make one call • Eat something • Find tomorrow's clothes • Write down one question	• Ask for help with one task • Sit outside for ten minutes • Put one document away • Go to bed

You are allowed to stop

There will often still be work left when you stop for the day. That does not mean stopping was wrong. Ordinary moments are allowed inside recovery too - a meal that tastes good, a television show, a joke, a child's game, or an hour when nobody discusses the disaster.

Rest is not withdrawal from recovery.

Sometimes rest is part of recovery.

4. A few things you could try

There is no universal technique for feeling better. These are practical coping options drawn from established disaster and stress-management guidance. Explore what feels useful. Leave what does not.

Orient to what is here now

If your thoughts feel pulled toward what happened or what might happen, you could deliberately notice the present: look around, notice what you can see, listen for sounds, feel where your feet or body meet the floor or chair, and name where you are and what is happening right now.

Try a slower breath

Some people find slow, comfortable breathing useful. You might let your breathing remain natural while allowing the exhale to become unhurried. Do not force the breath. If focusing on breathing feels uncomfortable or makes you lightheaded, stop and use another tool.

Something else you could try: a cyclic sigh

Take one comfortable inhale. Take a second, smaller inhale. Then let the breath out slowly and fully. You could repeat the pattern gently if it feels comfortable.

Evidence note: A 2023 randomized study in healthy adults found mood and respiratory-rate benefits from a daily cyclic-sighing practice. It was not a disaster-recovery treatment trial, and this guide does not present the practice as treatment for trauma, PTSD, anxiety disorders, or another condition.

Make one thing manageable

Write down the next task rather than holding ten tasks in your head. Ask someone to handle one call. Choose one room. Answer one email. Solve one problem. Then decide what comes next.

Return to ordinary rhythms where you can

You could return gradually to meals, sleep routines, safe movement, familiar activities, time outdoors, pets, hobbies, work, school, or ordinary family rituals.

Connect when connection helps

You might talk with someone you trust. You might sit with somebody without talking about the disaster at all. You might ask for specific practical help. You might choose some time alone. Connection is valuable, but connection does not require disclosure.

Step away from the disaster sometimes

If repeated news, photographs, social media, rumors, or recovery conversations are increasing your distress, you could choose periods when they are turned off.

A tool is not a requirement. If something helps, keep it. If something does not, leave it.

5. Honor their process too

People can live through the same event and experience it differently. That includes people living in the same house.

One person may...	Another may...
• Want to rebuild immediately • Keep photographs of the damage • Want volunteers around • Need to talk	• Not know whether they want to stay • Never want to see the photographs • Need privacy • Need quiet

Support does not require someone to recover the way you would.

Do not force the story

You can be available without prying. Some established disaster-support approaches emphasize listening without pressuring people to describe experiences or emotions they do not want to discuss.

A simple question
"Would talking help, or would you rather have some quiet?" Then accept either answer.

Children may show recovery differently too

Children's reactions can vary with age and may return when something reminds them of the disaster. You could offer opportunities to talk without demanding a conversation, answer questions simply and truthfully, correct frightening misinformation, explain what is known about what happens next, and return to familiar routines where possible.

- Let teachers or caregivers know that the family is recovering from a disaster when that would help them support the child.
- Be mindful of repeated disaster footage and conversations within earshot.
- Remember that one child may want to talk repeatedly while another may not want to talk at all.

The family does not need one shared emotional timetable

Partners may move at different speeds. Children and adults may move at different speeds. Extended family members may understand the loss differently. That can create friction even when everyone cares deeply.

Their reaction does not have to make sense to me in order to deserve respect.

6. Helping without taking over

The desire to help quickly after a disaster is one of the best things a community can offer. But a person surrounded by help can also become surrounded by decisions.

Good intentions do not eliminate the need for consent.

Before moving, discarding, cleaning, photographing, repairing, or entering private areas, ask.

Something that looks like debris to one person may be a possession, a memory, evidence for an insurance claim, or simply something the owner is not ready to address.

Help at the pace of the person you are helping

Specific offers can reduce the burden of organizing everybody else's goodwill.

Instead of...	You might offer...
• "Let me know if you need anything." • Showing up with a plan the resident did not ask for • Assuming cleanup is emotionally neutral	• "I can bring dinner Thursday. Would that help?" • "I can watch the kids while you meet the adjuster." • "Would you like help photographing this before it is moved?"

Respect "not yet"

"I don't know" is an answer. "Please leave it" is an answer. "Not today" is an answer. A person does not owe immediate decisions because volunteers are available right now.

Protect privacy

Do not assume someone's damaged home, belongings, conversations, paperwork, family circumstances, or emotional reaction belong on social media. Ask before photographing or sharing. Recovery should not cost someone control over their own story.

Come back later

The first wave of help matters enormously. So does the second. Not everyone knows what they need during the first few days. Sometimes the most valuable offer arrives after the crowd has gone home.

Helping can include making room.

Less urgency can sometimes be a form of care.

7. For the helpers: Recharge and decompress

Helping after disaster can be deeply meaningful. It can also be physically and emotionally exhausting. Disaster-response guidance recognizes that responders and volunteers need attention to personal health, limits, breaks, support, and recovery from the work itself.

The community needs people willing to help.

It also benefits when those people protect their own capacity.

RECHARGE	DECOMPRESS
• Sleep - give yourself a real opportunity to rest. • Food and water - do not let helping become a reason to skip basic needs all day. • Breaks - take them before exhaustion forces them. • Movement - stretch, walk, or move in ways that are safe for you. • Relationships - spend time with people who know you as something other than a volunteer. • Ordinary enjoyment - music, food, pets, hobbies, laughter, television, quiet, family time. • Time away - leave the recovery environment sometimes.	• Take a quiet walk. • Stretch, shower, and change clothes when you get home. • Sit outside or listen to music. • Talk with someone you trust. • Write unfinished tasks down so you do not keep rehearsing them mentally. • Use a comfortable breathing practice if that works for you. • Spend time away from disaster news and social media. • Do something completely ordinary - or simply be quiet.

Know when today is enough

You may notice exhaustion, difficulty concentrating, irritability, sleep problems, emotional distance, or that the work is increasingly difficult to leave behind. That does not mean you have failed. It may mean you need rest, a different assignment, time away, support, or a conversation with someone qualified to help.

Give yourself permission to hand it over.

There will nearly always be another branch, another load, another call, another family, another need. At some point you are allowed to say: "I have done what I can for today. Someone else can carry it for a while."

Resting today may be what allows you to help again tomorrow.

8. When the rush begins to slow

The early days after disaster can bring an extraordinary concentration of attention. Volunteers arrive. People bring food. Donations appear. Organizations mobilize. Neighbors check on neighbors. News crews cover the damage.

Then ordinary life begins calling people elsewhere.

The visible response may change	While recovery continues
• Jobs resume • Volunteers become tired • Temporary operations close • Media attention moves on	• Insurance continues • Repairs continue • Temporary housing continues • School, work, finances, sleep, and family life continue

Less visible does not mean finished.

Recovery can continue long after the damage stops being news.

Volunteers do not have to finish recovery during the surge

There can be a powerful feeling that everything must be accomplished while people and equipment are available. Some things are urgent. Some things are not. Helping well can include leaving room for residents to make decisions later.

Communities can keep helping differently

Later recovery may need fewer chainsaws and more patience.

- A ride.
- Childcare.
- A meal.
- Help understanding paperwork.
- A contractor recommendation.
- A quiet afternoon.
- Remembering an anniversary.
- Asking again: "How are things going now?"

Keep the second wave in mind.

Sometimes the most useful help begins after the first rush has passed.

9. When more support may help

Self-care and community support can be valuable. They are not substitutes for professional care when professional care is needed.

Consider reaching out to a qualified healthcare or mental-health professional when distress is persistent, worsening, or making it difficult to function in everyday life. That might include ongoing difficulty sleeping, working, attending school, maintaining relationships, caring for yourself or others, managing intense emotions, or coping safely.

You do not need to wait until things become unbearable.

Asking for support can itself be one possible part of going forward.

For children and teenagers

If a child's reactions are getting worse, persist, or interfere significantly with school, relationships, or daily life, consider support from an appropriate professional such as a pediatrician, school counselor, child psychologist, or another professional experienced with children's emotional needs.

Immediate crisis or danger

Immediate threat to life or safety: call 911

If someone is in immediate danger, emergency services are the right starting point.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988 for free, confidential emotional-crisis support in the United States. Online chat is also available through 988lifeline.org.

Disaster Distress Helpline

Call or text 1-800-985-5990 for disaster-related emotional distress support through SAMHSA.

Wisconsin 211

Dial 211 or 877-947-2211 for current local health, human-service, and community-resource referrals. Availability varies.

More help can coexist with everything else

Professional support can exist alongside family, friends, community, personal beliefs, exercise, rest, grounding, breathing, medication when prescribed, ordinary routines, and practical help. There is no prize for managing everything alone.

A quiet check-in

Recovery can create so much noise that it becomes difficult to notice what you actually need. This page is not a symptom checklist, diagnosis, or mental-health screening tool. It is simply a place to slow down.

Today, I notice:

What actually needs my attention today?

What can wait?

What is one thing within my control?

Who could help with one thing that is not?

Is there a boundary that would give me more room today?

Something I do not need to decide today:

What might help me recharge?

What might help me decompress?

One manageable next step:

Before you leave this page

You do not have to solve recovery here. Notice where you are. Choose what matters now. Let the rest wait when it can.

Sources and current information

This guide provides general disaster-recovery and emotional-wellness education.

People and circumstances differ. When medical, mental-health, crisis, legal, or other professional care is appropriate, use a qualified professional or responsible authority.

Included sources

- **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs - National Center for PTSD** - Self-Care After Disaster Events
- **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs / National Child Traumatic Stress Network** - Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide, including Provider Care materials
- **World Health Organization** - Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** - Helping Children Cope with a Disaster
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** - Disaster responder self-care resources and Disaster Distress Helpline information
- **Balban MY, et al.** - Brief structured respiration practices enhance mood and reduce physiological arousal. *Cell Reports Medicine*. 2023. *Used only to support the optional cyclic-sighing discussion.*

Important limitation

This guide does not replace diagnosis, psychotherapy, crisis care, medical treatment, legal advice, financial advice, or individualized professional guidance.

When current professional or emergency guidance conflicts with this guide, follow the current guidance.

Staying connected to current information

Crisis systems, local providers, programs, support groups, and community services can change. Use current official sources and the live Fox Valley Recovery Hub for current availability and time-sensitive updates.

Visit FoxValleyRecovery.org for current recovery information, resources, and support.

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Begin where you are.

There is no single way through recovery.

Take the time that is yours.

Give yourself room when you can.

Accept help when it helps.

Rest when you need to.

Honor the people traveling beside you, even when their path looks different from yours.

If you are strong enough to help today, help with care.

If you need to step away, step away.

There is no prize for arriving first.

There is no requirement to recreate who you were before.

Keep going forward.

FoxValleyRecovery.org

Find help. Offer help. Recover together.



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