

research in brief

Coping with Tragedy

Helping families deal with problems is Extension's job, but when tragedy strikes, we may not be ready to help families cope with this situation.

On a summer evening in August, 1976, a hard rain in Colorado caused the Big Thompson River to overflow and fill its canyon walls. Months later, when the rubble of boulders, trees, and houses was cleared, as many as 139 people were reported dead and 681 were homeless.

To determine how people cope with tragedy, a graduate student at Colorado State University interviewed 50 families who had been full-time residents of Big Thompson Canyon at the time of the flood. The interviews took place during the summer of 1977, almost a year after the flood.

This master's thesis is the first in a series of studies on the recovery of the victims of the flood. The interviews were taped and will provide a wealth of material for continued analysis of families recovering from disaster.

Following the flood, 31% of the families found their homes completely destroyed, 30% had homes that were partially destroyed, 53% lost friends, and 7% lost family members.

Here are some of the implications for Extension drawn from the study:

1. Help for recovery was provided most often from churches and government and less often from friends and relatives—suggesting that modern families look to and use help from groups outside of the family circle.
2. Family closeness in most cases was increased by the tragedy. Almost 75% of the families said they were close before the flood and that percentage increased after the flood.

Although most of the families were involved in a great deal of work following the flood, repairing damaged houses or setting up new housing, they were happy with themselves and happy in their marriages. Only 7% had suffered the loss of a family member, which may have led to the feeling, "Thank God we're all alive." This study suggests that people adjusted quite well to large problems if all family members survived the tragedy.

Also, 49% of the families interviewed said they were as happy as before the flood, 27% less happy, and 23% happier.

Marriage ratings show that 85% of the families felt that their marriages were "happy, very happy, extremely happy, or even perfect." Coping with the

flood and putting their lives back together didn't seem to drive a wedge into these marriages—instead it seemed to solidify them.

3. Teenagers were described as heroic both during and after the flood. They helped get younger children and older neighbors to safer ground during the flood and helped their families as the recovery stage began.
4. The Big Thompson School was invaluable in dealing with the children's recovery from the flood. All of the school children lost classmates, one child lost a father, and some were suffering from separation or divorce. At the first rain following the flood, the children's fears and anxieties returned. The principal said, "We shut down the school, gathered in a circle, put our arms around each other, and talked." The entire staff spent the following year dealing with the children's needs.

Editor's Note

The interviews from the Big Thompson flood will provide, for years to come, insights into the way people recover from tragedy. At this point, the evidence shows that families often become closer as a result of a disaster, but they may find themselves fighting in frustration at not being able to totally meet the needs of every family member. Most important for Extension, families need and are willing to accept outside help in their efforts to recover from unexpected disasters.

"Families in the Aftermath of Disaster: The Big Thompson Flood of 1976." Judith Ann Miller. Master's thesis, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, 1977.

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