

Returning Home After a Catastrophic Natural Disaster

Safety, stabilization, emotional support, and recovery resources for employees and household members returning home after a severe disaster.

If You Need Help Now: Immediate danger, life safety, or urgent medical needs: Call 911

— Start Here: Support and Disaster Assistance

Preparing to Return Home

[Website](#)

CDC returning-home guidance with health and safety tips for hazards, damaged utilities, cleanup, mold, and safe re-entry.

Disaster-Related Distress

[Website](#)

SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline: free, confidential, 24/7 crisis counseling.
Call/text 800-985-5990.

Immediate Needs

[Website](#)

American Red Cross: emergency shelter, food, reunification, and recovery resources.
Call: 1-800-RED-CROSS / 1-800-733-2767.
Local support: Call 211 or visit 211.org for food, housing, utilities, and community resources.

Federal Disaster Assistance

[Website](#)

FEMA / DisasterAssistance.gov: apply for eligible assistance after a declared disaster.
FEMA Helpline: 800-621-3362

— Validating Your Emotions

Coming home can bring mixed emotions

Relief, sadness, anxiety, anger, and exhaustion can all show up at the same time. These are common reactions after an abnormal and disruptive event. Focus on basics first: sleep, food, water, medication, rest, and safety.

Start small, accept help, and take recovery one task at a time.

Remember: Recovery takes time. If stress, anxiety, or sadness starts interfering with daily life, reaching out for support is a sign of strength.

For emotional crisis support, call/text 988.

First 72 Hours Back: Safety First, Then Stability

A simple structure can make re-entry feel less overwhelming: confirm safety, check hazards, protect your body, and stabilize one small area.

Before entering:

Only return when local authorities confirm it is safe. Have a professional inspect for structural damage, downed power lines, unstable debris, or damaged utilities when needed.

— Safety-First Checklist

1

Do a slow walk-through

Check for gas smells, sagging ceilings, buckled floors, pests, mold, sharp debris, or standing water.

2

Pause utilities if unsure

Do not turn on electricity, gas, water, tools, outlets, or appliances if water is present or damage is suspected.

3

Ventilate and use PPE

Open windows when safe. Wear an N95/KN95 mask, gloves, eye protection, sturdy shoes, and long sleeves.

4

Document first

Take photos and videos before moving items. Save receipts for lodging, supplies, cleanup, and repairs.

— Reduce Overload While You Stabilize



Make one room livable

For sleep and basic hygiene instead of trying to restore the whole home at once.



Limit daily priorities

Choose only three tasks per day, such as calling insurance, getting medication, or clearing one walkway.



Keep a safe zone

For basic supplies, medications, chargers, documents, and pet items.

Managing Stress, Family Needs, and Ongoing Recovery

Aim for micro-recovery, not perfect calm. Small resets, predictable routines, and organized records can reduce stress over time.

— Emotional Recovery Tools

Micro-recovery strategies

- Two-minute grounding: name 5 things you see, 4 feel, 3 hear, 2 smell, and 1 taste.
- Box breathing: inhale 4, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4; repeat 3 to 5 cycles.
- Lower decision load: write one short daily plan with only 3 priorities.

Sleep and self-talk

- Protect sleep where possible: use a consistent bedtime window, limit doom-scrolling, stop caffeine mid-afternoon, and keep the sleep area cool/dark.
- Try trauma-informed self-talk: "My system is reacting normally to abnormal conditions."

— Family and Relationship Tips

Check in without fixing everything

Disaster stress may show up as irritability, shutdown, clinginess, forgetfulness, or conflict. Try a 10-minute daily check-in: one hard thing, one need, and one small win.

Support kids and teens

Keep routines small and predictable: meals, bedtime, and school check-ins. Let them help with safe, bounded tasks, and limit repeated exposure to graphic images or news.

— Practical Steps That Reduce Stress Later

Organize records and protect yourself from scams

- Create a disaster recovery binder or phone folder for IDs, claim numbers, receipts, photos, contractor quotes, FEMA/SBA correspondence, and notes from calls.
- Track spending for temporary lodging, mileage, supplies, cleanup, and repairs; many programs reimburse only with proof.
- Verify contractor license/insurance, avoid full cash payment up front, and get 2 to 3 written estimates.