

Living in Close Quarters: Coping Strategies

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Natural disasters can cause unbelievable destruction and loss. For those blessed to survive, the struggle is not over. Many of those hit hard are without homes, jobs, personal possessions, etc. Some of these survivors are fortunate to have temporary homes with friends or relatives, but even this can generate much stress for everyone concerned. If you are in this situation, keep reading for tips to help you cope with the stress of new, uncertain and potentially crowded living conditions.

For the guest

You didn't choose to have your home destroyed or your life changed so radically, but here you are in different surroundings and uncertain circumstances. Your living arrangement at this time could be compounding the stress of the loss and change. If you feel overwhelmed by the unfamiliar place, changed routines and the number of people in the house, you might find these suggestions helpful.

- Take care of yourself by getting adequate nutrition, sleep and exercise.
- Go for long walks by yourself when it feels too crowded.
- Get your children out of the house often and visit a park, playground, library, etc.
- Find a quiet place to write down your thoughts in a journal. Begin to process all of your feelings about the disaster's effect on you.
- Pitch in wherever you can in your temporary home to help feel useful rather than burdensome.
- If possible, make your personal space in the house familiar by placing photos or cherished items around you. If you lost all of your possessions, perhaps you could pick flowers and place them in a cup by your sleeping space.
- When in doubt about your hosts' wishes and expectations, ask! Don't let something like where to hang damp towels or whether to unplug the coffee pot create tension between you.
- Hold on to the hope that this difficult time will pass.

For the host

You are doing something wonderful by helping someone in need! But this means that *your* life as you knew it is now disrupted—and that can be stressful. Like your guest, you must also take care of your needs and find times to be by yourself. Certainly you can be thankful that your home was not destroyed and that your life will probably get back to normal much sooner than your guest's will. In the meantime, these tips might help.

- Expect to compromise your usual routines somewhat to accommodate your guests, but hold on to whatever activities you reasonably can. For example, try to keep your

appointments, dates with friends, bowling night, etc.

- If possible, keep your bedroom as your sanctuary, a place you can escape to for privacy and solitude. Walls too thin? Put on a headset and listen to relaxing music.
- Say what the rules of the house are. Perhaps you will not allow food out of the kitchen, shoes on the carpet, etc. And if you do not intend to babysit for your guests' children, say so!
- Be very clear from the beginning if you expect your guests to help with the added expenses of their stay.
- Hold on to a sense of humor and imagine how much you can learn from this experience.

For the household

Whether you are the guest or the host, your new arrangement challenges your comfort, convenience, privacy and freedom. The entire household should have a meeting where concerns can be expressed and boundaries established. Laying out the house rules with a caring, positive attitude benefits everyone. Schedules and chores might have to be delegated and posted to help reduce stress. Here are some ideas to consider:

- Agree on a schedule for bathing, cooking, doing laundry, watching television, using the phone and computer, etc. to avoid conflict or resentment.
- Find a reasonable division of clean-up duty for everyone in the house. Conflicting bedtimes? Establish limits on noisy activities after a certain time in the evening.
- Set clear expectations concerning food. Who will shop for groceries? Is everything in the kitchen available to everyone at any time? Will you all eat meals together?
- If possible, find fun things for everyone to do together occasionally, such as pop popcorn and watch a movie, work a jigsaw puzzle or play board games.

Change can be hard for everyone. A crowded home and disrupted routines make it worse. The best strategy to help you all cope with such stress is to keep communicating with each other. Expect some inconvenience and discomfort, but you *can* work together toward establishing boundaries and new routines.

Resource

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry www.aacap.org

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