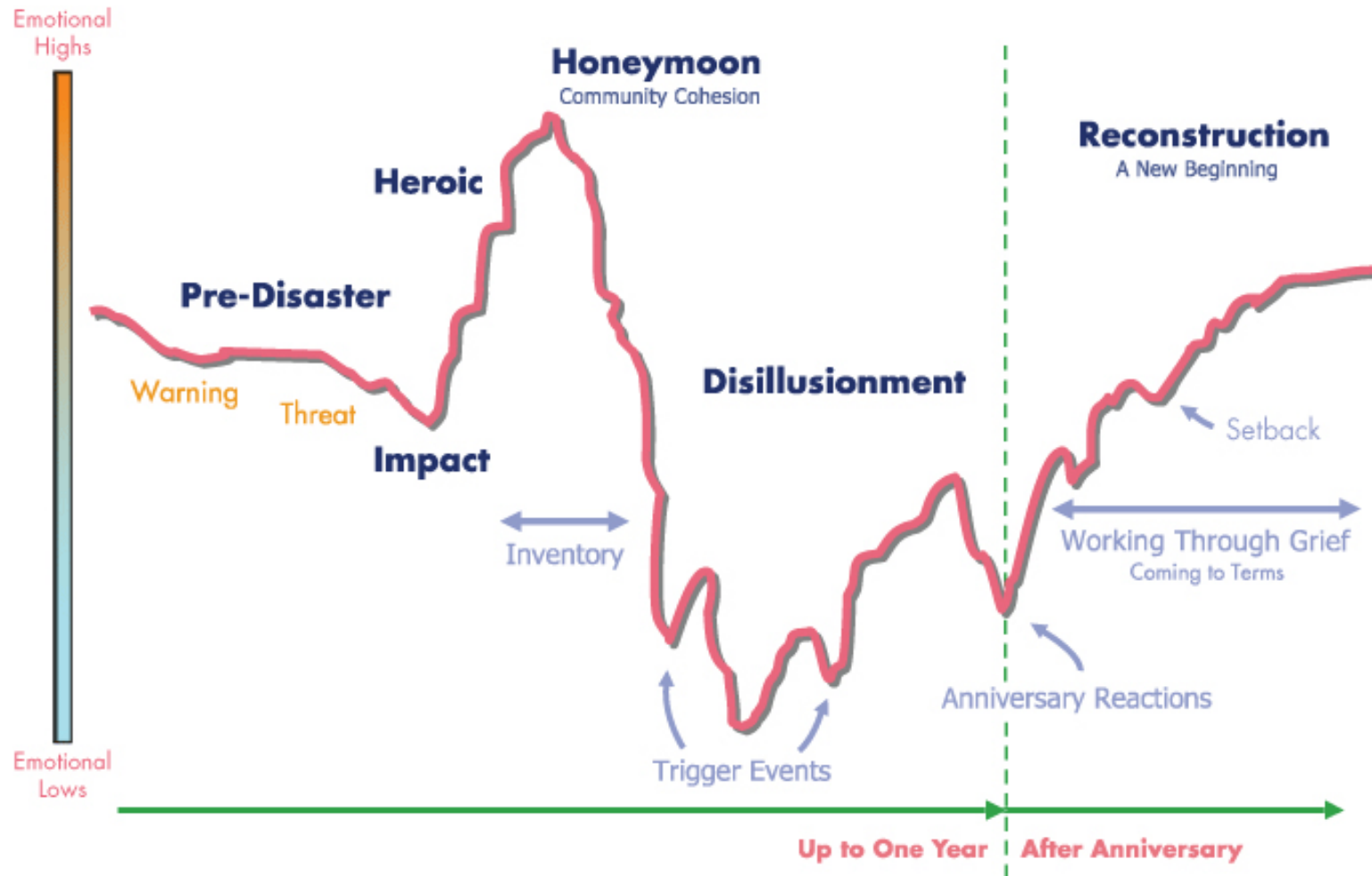


## EMOTIONAL PHASES OF A DISASTER: COLLECTIVE REACTIONS



The graphic above illustrates the general progression of the disaster effects and reactions on communities from the pre-disaster or warning phase through the reconstruction phase. You can read more about each phase by clicking on the phase titles.

## Phases of Disaster - Description

Starting from left to right, this graph illustrates the general progression of the disaster effects and reactions on communities.

- The first is the **Pre-Disaster Phase** where the amount of warning a community receives varies by the type of disaster. Perceived threat varies depending on many factors.
- Next is the **Impact Phase**. The greater the scope, community destruction, and personal losses associated with the disaster, the greater the psychosocial effects.
- Next is the **Heroic Phase** which is characterized by high altruism among both survivors and emergency responders.
- In the following weeks and months is the **Honeymoon Phase** where survivors feel a short-lived sense of optimism.
- Over time, survivors go through an inventory process where they recognize the limits of available disaster assistance. This leads into the **Disillusionment Phase** where survivors are coming to grips with reality of their situation. Certain trigger events, such as the anniversary of the disaster, can prompt survivors to re-experience negative emotions related to the disaster.
- Lastly, during the **Reconstruction Phase**, survivors experience setbacks and work through their grief, eventually readjusting to their new surrounding and situations.

### Pre-Disaster Phase

Disasters vary in the amount of warning communities receive before they occur. For example, earthquakes typically hit with no warning; whereas, hurricanes and floods typically arrive within hours to days of warning. When there is no warning, survivors may feel more vulnerable, unsafe, and fearful of future unpredicted tragedies. The perception that they had no control over protecting themselves or their loved ones can be deeply distressing.

When people do not heed warnings and suffer losses as a result, they may experience guilt and self-blame. While they may have specific plans for how they might protect themselves in the future, they can be left with a sense of guilt or responsibility for what has occurred.

### Impact Phase

The impact phase of a disaster can vary from the slow, low-threat buildup associated with some types of floods to the violent, dangerous, and destructive outcomes associated with tornadoes and explosions. The greater the scope, community destruction, and personal losses associated with the disaster, the greater the psychosocial effects.

Depending on the characteristics of the incident, people's reactions range from constricted, stunned, shock-like responses to the less common overt expressions of panic or hysteria. Most typically, people respond initially with confusion and disbelief, and focus on the survival and physical well-being of themselves and their loved ones. When families are in different geographic locations during the impact of a disaster (e.g., children at school, adults at work), survivors will experience considerable anxiety until they are reunited.

## Heroic Phase

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster event, survival, rescuing others, and promoting safety are priorities. Evacuation to shelters, motels, or other homes may be necessary. For some, post-impact disorientation gives way to adrenaline-induced rescue behavior to save lives and protect property. While activity level may be high, actual productivity is often low. The capacity to assess risk may be impaired and injuries can result. Altruism is prominent among both survivors and emergency responders.

The conditions associated with evacuation and relocation have psychological significance. When there are physical hazards or family separations during the evacuation process, survivors often experience posttrauma reactions. When the family unit is not together due to shelter requirements or other factors, an anxious focus on the welfare of those not present may detract from the attention necessary for immediate problem solving.

## Honeymoon Phase

During the week to months following a disaster, formal governmental and volunteer assistance may be readily available. Community bonding occurs as a result of sharing the catastrophic experience and the giving and receiving of community support. Survivors may experience a short-lived sense of optimism that the help they will receive will make them whole again. When disaster mental health workers are visible and perceived as helpful during this phase, they are more readily accepted and have a foundation from which to provide assistance in the difficult phases ahead.

## Disillusionment Phase

Over time, survivors go through an inventory process during which they begin to recognize the limits of available disaster assistance. They become physically exhausted due to enormous multiple demands, financial pressures, and the stress of relocation or living in a damaged home. The unrealistic optimism initially experienced can give way to discouragement and fatigue. As disaster assistance agencies and volunteer groups begin to pull out, survivors may feel abandoned and resentful. Survivors calculate the gap between the assistance they have received and what they will require to regain their former living conditions and lifestyle. Stressors abound—family discord, financial losses, bureaucratic hassles, time constraints, home reconstruction, relocation, and lack of recreation or leisure time. Health problems and exacerbations of pre-existing conditions emerge due to ongoing, unrelenting stress and fatigue. The larger community less impacted by the disaster has often returned to business as usual, which typically is discouraging and alienating for survivors. Ill will and resentment may surface in neighborhoods as survivors receive unequal monetary amounts for what they perceive to be equal or similar damage. Divisiveness and hostility among neighbors undermine community cohesion and support.

## Reconstruction Phase

The reconstruction of physical property and recovery of emotional well-being may continue for years following the disaster. Survivors have realized that they will need to solve the problems of rebuilding their own homes, businesses, and lives largely by themselves and have gradually assumed the responsibility for doing so. With the construction of new residences, buildings, and roads comes another level of recognition of losses. Survivors are faced with the need to readjust to and integrate new surroundings as they continue to grieve losses. Emotional resources within the family may be

exhausted, and social support from friends and family may be worn thin. When people come to see meaning, personal growth, and opportunity from their disaster experience despite their losses and pain, they are well on the road to recovery. While disasters may bring profound life-changing losses, they also bring the opportunity to recognize personal strengths and to reexamine life priorities. Individuals and communities progress through these phases at different rates, depending on the type of disaster and the degree and nature of disaster exposure. This progression may not be linear or sequential, as each person and community brings unique elements to the recovery process. Individual variables, such as psychological resilience, social support, and financial resources, influence a survivor's capacity to move through the phases. While there is always a risk of aligning expectations too rigidly with a developmental sequence, having an appreciation of the unfolding of psychosocial reactions to disaster is valuable.

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2000). Training manual for mental health and human services workers in major disasters, second edition. Washington, DC.**