CREATING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES TO OVERCOME OIL SPILL DISASTERS

How are communities impacted by disasters?

**Natural disasters** can devastate communities. Community members can be displaced from their homes and become overwhelmed figuring out how to rebuild their lives. Despite these challenges, community members tend to respond to natural disasters in a more positive way than human-caused disasters. They come together and help one another rebuild their lives.\(^1\,^2\)

**Human-caused disasters**, such as accidental oil spills, tend to break down even the strongest communities. Impacts to human health, the environment, and the economy – whether real or perceived – may lead to additional stress and anxiety among community members.\(^1\,^2\,^3\)

“When hurricanes happen ... it pull[s] people together—there is nothing to gain by exploiting the situation. I have seen the BP experience bring out the worst in people ... It has divided ... this community ... because it brought competition and jealousy ... ”\(^2\)

What can we do to help communities during and after an oil spill?

**Worry and stress rises**
The mental health of residents can be negatively impacted by an oil spill, especially for those directly affected. People in the oil, fishing, and tourism industries may lose their source of income and face uncertainty about how long the loss may last.\(^3\) Oil spills also come with physical health risks, which can be real or perceived.\(^4\,^5\)

**Pointing fingers is common**
During a human-made disaster, blame and distrust can extend farther than just the responsible party. Certain groups might be more distrusting of leaders due to prolonged or uncertain impacts, cleanup efforts, and bad feelings over past regulations.\(^2\,^6\)

**Compensation causes conflict**
Compensation programs can lead to confusion and competition. Residents can perceive others’ payments for lost income as unfair. They also may compare their claims, compete for funds, and become stressed about financial uncertainty - all of which can hinder recovery.\(^1\,^2\)
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