



OIL SPILL SCIENCE

SEA GRANT PROGRAMS OF THE GULF OF MEXICO

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 ...”¹

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 which can hinder recovery.^{1,2}

Build healthy communities



Promote healthy lifestyles

Some traits help individuals and communities recover more quickly. Feeling strong attachment to your home and neighbors, having sense of purpose in your life, living through a previous disaster, and perceiving yourself able to “bounce back” are all traits that lead to resiliency.³

Communicate early and effectively



Know your audience

Disasters will impact communities in different ways. Public perception can often outweigh reality. Experts suggest giving special attention to residents who have unique ties to damaged or threatened resources. Timely and effective communication is important — information should come from trusted groups embedded in the community.⁶

Create a fair compensation process



Learn from the past

Making the claims process more transparent and easy to understand may reduce negative perceptions, comparisons, and competition. Experts recommend providing counseling programs for emotional stress, settling claims without litigation, and investing in more funding for communities instead of individuals, which encourages residents to work together toward recovery.¹

Help yourself and others

- Call the Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746.
- The Department of Homeland Security lists resources about health, safety, coping, and helping others: <https://www.ready.gov/recovering-disaster>
- Peer listening provides a support network during a disaster: <http://masgc.org/peer-listening>

Get accurate, up-to-date information

Contact or follow these agencies:

- Your local Sea Grant program can provide science-based information: <http://seagrant.noaa.gov/>
- NOAA's Office of Response and Restoration works with the US Coast Guard during oil spills: <https://response.restoration.noaa.gov/about/orr-field-staff.html>
- NOAA Incident News tracks the status of oil spills around the nation: <https://incidentnews.noaa.gov/>

Clarify the compensation process

- The National Pollution Funds Center lists the process for submitting oil spill claims: <https://www.uscg.mil/Mariners/National-Pollution-Funds-Center/Claims/>

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