



The Gulf Oil Disaster: Developing a Positive Outlook in the Face of Tragedy

The oil catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico is creating an array of devastation. The Gulf's ecological system is being inundated with crude oil and dispersants. People who live and work in the Gulf area or who are aiding with the cleanup are experiencing first-hand the destruction of a way of life.

Watching and reading about the effects of oil on the wildlife and environment is heart-wrenching. The magnitude of this disaster is enough to challenge anyone's psychological health. People are experiencing strong emotions as a result of these enormous challenges. Also, some are worrying about unknown outcomes, such as the health effects of exposure to the oil and dispersants, as well as how these may contaminate the drinking water, food and air.

The extent to which we can recover, rebuild and go on with life-as-we-know-it is uncertain.

Reasons for Hope

Extreme hardships can be part of living. Unfortunately, people rarely make it through life without experiencing some form of tragedy.

As overwhelming as the current challenges are in the Gulf, there are ways to work through these trying times and move on. We know from psychological research that people who have endured very challenging life circumstances can manage to get through them and build satisfying lives. Survivors of tragedy can actually experience positive growth in the months and years that follow. Research shows that people can learn to feel positive about their own personal strengths, relate better to others, become open to new possibilities, experience spiritual change, and have a greater appreciation for life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001).

In addition, previous oil disasters have been cleaned up sufficiently to restore some ways of life. In 1979, a Mexican oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico released millions of gallons of crude oil into the water. In the 31 years since that disaster, the Gulf has rebounded. In addition to manmade recovery efforts, naturally occurring ocean microorganisms helped to break down the oil over time.

Understanding Loss

This enormous spill shares similarities with other devastating life experiences. In this particular situation, the loss of livelihood, property, and/or community can feel as devastating as the death of a loved one, the diagnosis of a serious illness, a divorce, or the aftermath of a terrorist attack. These losses are often accompanied by feelings of disbelief or shock, anger, confusion, anxiety, sadness, being overwhelmed, or unable to make decisions or take actions. These are common initial reactions to devastating life situations and they tend to lessen over time.

Researchers who have studied grief and loss identify a number of stages that people can experience. These include denial (disbelief), anger, bargaining (trying to negotiate things that can be changed in order to get back what was lost), depression and acceptance (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). People move back and forth between these stages over time as they are adjusting to the loss. Grief is a highly individualized process; everyone approaches it in a slightly different manner and its duration can vary. Grieving important losses is often a painful and difficult process that allows for moving beyond loss and building a future.

In addressing how the Gulf situation is affecting you personally, you may experience some of these stages of loss. The tragedy may also evoke feelings and memories of past losses. These are common reactions and may be natural ways of managing the loss of a way of life.

Building Resilience

The American Psychological Association (APA) developed a public education campaign – Road to Resilience - to help people manage challenging life events. Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” from adversity and adapt to changing circumstances. It involves skills that people can learn and apply in their daily lives.

Outlined in APA's Road to Resilience brochure are ten ways people can build resilience and better manage difficult life experiences. These recommendations may help you to better handle the current Gulf disaster.

Make connections. Good relationships with close family members, friends, or others are important. Accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens resilience. Some people find that being active in civic groups, faith-based organizations, or other local groups provides social support and can help with reclaiming hope. Assisting others in their time of need also can benefit the helper.

Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems. You can't change the fact that highly stressful events happen, but you can change how you interpret and respond to these events. Try looking beyond the present to how future circumstances may be a little better. Note any subtle ways in which you might already feel somewhat better as you deal with difficult situations.

Accept that change is a part of living. Certain goals may no longer be attainable as a result of adverse situations. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can alter.

Move toward your goals. Develop some realistic goals. Do something regularly -- even if it seems like a small accomplishment -- that enables you to move toward your goals. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself, "What's one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?"

Take decisive actions. Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive actions, rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away.

Look for opportunities for self-discovery. People often learn something about themselves and may find that they have grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, greater sense of strength even while feeling vulnerable, increased sense of self-worth, a more developed spirituality, and heightened appreciation for life.

Nurture a positive view of yourself. Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts helps build resilience.

Keep things in perspective. Even when facing very painful events, try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective.

Maintain a hopeful outlook. An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear.

Take care of yourself. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly. Taking care of yourself helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience.

To learn more about resilience, please review APA's Road to Resilience brochure.

Summary

The Gulf of Mexico oil catastrophe is very distressing. However, there are reasons to be hopeful. Life often brings hardship, but people can manage tremendous adversity and go on to live productive and satisfying lives. Building resilience skills can help people successfully manage extraordinary challenges.

For many people, the information in this document may be sufficient to get through the current disaster. At times, however, an individual can have difficulty managing intense reactions. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can assist you in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if you feel like you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living. You can find psychologists near you by contacting your state psychological association.

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Resources

Kubler-Ross, E. & Kessler, D. (2005). On grief and grieving: finding the meaning of grief through five stages of loss. New York, NY: Scribner

Calhoun, L. & Tedeschi, R. (2001) Posttraumatic growth: The positive lessons of loss. In R.A. Neimeyer (Ed), Meaning reconstruction & the experience of loss. (pp. 157-172). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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