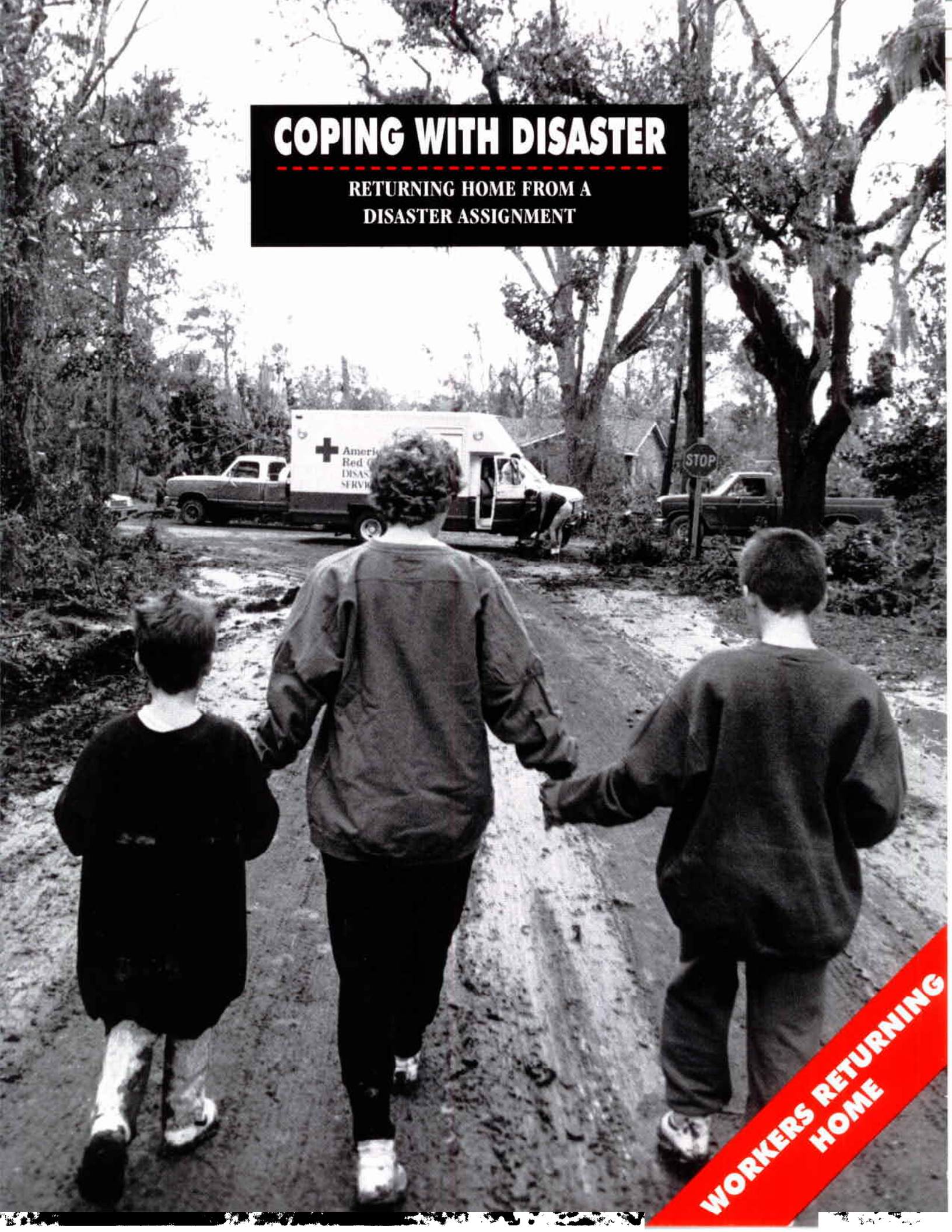


# COPING WITH DISASTER

RETURNING HOME FROM A  
DISASTER ASSIGNMENT



**WORKERS RETURNING  
HOME**

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## RETURNING HOME FROM A DISASTER ASSIGNMENT

**D**isaster work can be a unique and very rewarding experience, as we provide urgently needed services to individuals and communities affected by disaster. Relationships are quickly formed among disaster workers, creating a sense of “family,” as we all work toward a common goal. There is a sense of “adventure” as we face the unique aspects of service delivery in each disaster setting, a sense of shared pride as we ease the suffering of victims we encounter, and a sense of personal pride in our ability to carry out the Red Cross mission under less than desirable conditions.

We have experienced things that most people—including our families, friends, and co-workers—would not begin to understand or appreciate, and that can be a serious problem when it is time to leave the operation and return home.

Here are some tips to help you:

### **REST**

Often, you may not get enough rest while working on a disaster, and when you return home you will feel exhausted. It may take several days to catch up, and both family members and employers rarely understand that you need time to yourself before you can begin a full schedule of “normal” activities. Each person may also have “saved” projects for you, and you may feel pressured to begin producing right away. You will need to carefully negotiate the time you need, and it may work best if you begin to do that while you are still on the operation and are negotiating your COB date.

### **PACE**

On an operation, you are performing your job as quickly as possible to provide as much assis-

tance as you can in the shortest amount of time possible. It is often difficult to adjust to the more relaxed pace you were used to before you left, and at which co-workers and family members are proceeding now. Try to remember that you need to adjust your speed to meet theirs.

### **SHARING**

You will want to talk to family members and co-workers about your experiences, and they will be eager to tell you about theirs. Compared to what you have seen and done, their experiences while you were gone may seem shallow or meaningless to you, while your experiences may be so far outside anything they can relate to that conversation may be very difficult for a while.

Be tolerant and understanding of what others want to share; their experiences are as important to them as yours are to you. For some people, statements that sound accusatory, such as “You weren’t here when the washer overflowed, or the kids threw up, or the dog ran away, or we had a surprise audit,” are only their way of saying, “We missed you.”

### **EMOTIONS**

When you return home, it is possible that some of your emotions or emotional swings may surprise or even frighten you. If you can anticipate some of these emotions, you will be able to manage them better. They include—

- **Disappointment**—You may feel disappointed that others are not interested in hearing about your experiences or that your reunion with your family and co-workers does not live up to your expectations. You may expect they will be happy to have you home and be

surprised to find they are angry at your absence. Try to keep reunion expectations realistic.

- **Frustration and conflict**—Your needs may be inconsistent with those of your family or colleagues. While you may want nothing more than a good home-cooked meal after weeks of Mass Care or restaurant food, your family may be sick of their own cooking and want to go to a restaurant. Or, you may want to never attend a staff meeting again, while your department at work has been holding off having one until you could provide input.
- **Anger**—Problems presented by your family, friends, or co-workers may seem very trivial compared to those facing the clients you just left. You may find the same reaction as you read the paper or watch the news. While they may not face problems of the same magnitude, try to remember that theirs are as important to them at this moment as the problems of disaster victims were to themselves.
- **Victim identification**—You may see actions or characteristics of people at home that will remind you of your experience with disaster victims. This may produce emotional reactions that can surprise and confuse not only you, but also the unwitting recipient of your emotions. Be aware of this possibility and try to make others understand the reasons behind your reactions.
- **Daydreaming**—As you go about your daily tasks, you may find yourself wishing you could return to the disaster you just left, or be sent out on another assignment right away. With the pace so slow at home, and the need so great at disaster settings, it is easy to convince yourself you were happier, more productive, and more understood and appreciated on the disaster operation—and that victims need you more than your family, friends, and co-workers need you. This is especially true if you left before the Emergency Assistance phase of the operation was completed. Remember that you are more important to the folks at home than you can imagine; they just express their appreciation differently.

- **Mood swings**—Mood swings are common after returning home. You may change from happy to sad, tense to relaxed, or outgoing to quiet without much warning. These mood swings are normal and natural, and one of the ways in which you resolve conflicting feelings you have experienced on the operation. They will pass in time, when you have had an opportunity to put your assignment into perspective.

## **CHILDREN**

It is sometimes difficult to explain to children why you felt it was important to be away from them for an extended period. Information about why you are leaving and phone calls home during your assignment will help reduce their sense of isolation and calm their fears that they are being abandoned.

When you return home, you will need to be especially careful that you do not frighten them with stories about what you have seen and done. Factual information about the disaster coupled with involving them in preparedness efforts for your family will help them feel like they are a part of what you have been doing and reduce their fears about similar disasters at home.

## **FOR FURTHER ASSISTANCE**

While disaster experiences are very personal, there are many common problems generated by the intense physical, emotional, and intellectual climate that other disaster workers share. If you have any unusual reactions or any that last for an extended period, please feel free to contact Disaster Services at your local chapter and ask to talk to an experienced disaster worker or a DMHS representative on the DHS Subcommittee. He or she *will* be able to understand what you are saying and provide appropriate feedback. If necessary, you can be referred to a mental health worker who can help you work through your many feelings.

Your participation in disaster relief operations is very important to the entire organization, and we want to do everything possible to make it a rewarding and enriching experience.



**American  
Red Cross**