

How to Prepare for a Disaster, Emotionally and Mentally

August 24, 2021

IT WAS AUGUST 2020 and the United States had just [surpassed](#) its 5 millionth reported Covid-19 case. Meanwhile, [hundreds of fires](#) raged across my home state of California, incinerating small towns. Local news toggled between maps with red blotches indicating Covid hot spots or areas vulnerable to the fire's path. I imagined embers leaping closer to home or toxic air swirling outside, a concoction of virus and smoke. While I was safe and sheltered with a well-stocked emergency bag nearby, I found myself ill-equipped and incapable of keeping my head calm as the foundations of *my* world—routines, interactions, surroundings—melted away.

Disasters break us because they feel uncontainable and uncontrollable. The earliest use of the word *disaster* [dates back](#) to the 16th century, and it was used to describe mass devastation—plagues, floods, wars—thought to be caused by the movements of stars. Today, we no longer blame celestial bodies for upending our lives, but this does not mean disasters are easier to manage.

Researchers expect that the psychological scars of the pandemic will run deep: [A recent CDC survey showed](#) that anxiety and depression increased by 30 percent since 2019. Other problems multiply as political and social foundations unravel, while social media amplifies the chaos. “People who substantially engage with the media are more distressed, even if they did not experience the harm firsthand,” Roxane Cohen Silver, a professor of psychological science at UC Irvine told me. She has studied disasters like the 2010 earthquake and tsunami in Bio Bio, Chile, and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. She also studies how [media coverage can trigger stress](#), which then makes people consume more content to justify the stress. “It is a difficult cycle to break away from the more fearful and hypervigilant we become,” she says. We are trapped in a carousel of crises—an unstoppable hell ride—that we simultaneously suffer together and alone.

...