

How to Help the Flooded

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I'm not much for writing long posts. Making an exception in hopes it helps the flooded.

Trauma Is Tricky

A flooded home is a traumatic event. Like any trauma, it is tricky to know how to help someone experiencing such a terrible event.

Jen and I flooded on Memorial Day 2015 and again on Tax Day 2016. The second flood came just days after completing the restoration and decoration of our house from the first flood. If cruelty was a color, we saw red for a long time.

Flood victims often experience what I liken to shell-shock meets heart-break meets chaos. Toss in moments of exhaustion, terror, and rage and you've got a pretty fair description of what's in store.

When people wrestle with trauma like this, one of the last things they will ask for is help. But it's what they need most.

Be the Tortoise

The good news is that if you want to help someone who has flooded, the best way is to show up.

Helping the flooded comes with an understanding that this is a marathon, not a sprint. They'll need you more in the weeks after, when most have moved on and the adrenaline has worn off. So pace your help, and pace yourself. Be the tortoise.

If you know someone who flooded, get out your calendar and pick a day or two a week for the next ten weeks or more and write down "show up."

One day, drop off something and say hi. Another day, work for an hour or two. And another day, have them over for dinner on a weekend. If you can only do one thing, one time, then do it. No act of showing up is too small. Dropping off a hot cup of coffee will be remembered for years to come.

As a rule, don't just ask if they need anything, ask if they need anything else. Say "I'm coming by with trash bags and lunch, need anything else?" This signals that you've already committed to coming by. They're likely to tell you what else they need.

Gesture Up

Jennifer Castillo De Williams and I will never forget when someone we hardly knew drove up to the side of our yard. It was so full of flooded belongings that the driver didn't get out. She rolled down her window and handed over a giant bag of Chick-fil-a. She smiled, offered her sympathies and drove off. We were exhausted, caked in mud, and heartbroken—and in that moment, Chick-fil-A never tasted so good.

We promised we would remember how simple gestures like this meant so much to us at the time. They offered beautiful brief moments of normalcy in between many long abnormal ones.

Help of this kind is fairly easy. Try to work it into your weekday or weekend routines. Plan ways to make thoughtful gestures for anyone you know who has flooded.

Life on Mars

When you flood, you might as well be on Mars. Everything that was easy and familiar is now complex and foreign. You can't find files, documents, cards, keys, devices... you name it. Simple tasks get sucked into massive black holes of work. It's maddening.

Then there are the things of sentimental value: the drawings from the kids; the shoes they wore on their first step; the wedding album. Those treasures, they're all gone.

Yes, it's just stuff, but make no mistake, sifting through the filthy wreckage that was once your life's memories is brutal. You will have some good, long cries as you toss them out en masse. But you will get through it and you'll be tougher for it, maybe even enlightened.

Flood Club

Those who survive the salvos of Houston's floods enter a club that knows something about loss and have an appreciation for what matters most. For me, it brought a little less whining.

Be aware there is something unsettling that lingers for some club members. I suppose it's a kind of mild PTSD that seeps in between the evacuations and ridiculous toil. When I hear the rain now, it's no longer my soothing friend. It's kind of a sinister thing that taunts me when I look outside to see what's coming up to the door.

It comes down to this: every thoughtful thing you can do to help someone recover from a flood is probably one less thing they'll have to manage alongside their overwhelming grief.

So try to give the flooded a few moments of peace in what feels like a strange unprovoked war.

Showtime

Here are some practical ways to "show up" by bringing or doing stuff. Feel free to add to these lists in comments, it's endless.

Stuff you can bring

- Face masks and work gloves to reduce exposure to mold and other particulate matter. Be aware that if you are using hazardous solvents for cleaning you may need half-face respirators with cartridges.
- Cases of bottled water
- Floor fans
- Old newspapers for packing
- Cases of paper towels
- Cases of toilet paper
- Cases of sanitizing wipes
- Battery powered camping lanterns
- Power strips
- Work gloves
- Pop up tables to place and stage stuff

- Step ladders
- Drop cloths
- Hammers, blade utility knives
- Sharpies of different sizes and colors
- Good first aid kit (many cuts and scrapes during clean up)
- Rolls of duct tape and packing tape
- Hand sanitizer
- Plastic bins/containers of different sizes with lids
- Cardboard boxes (small, medium, and large)
- Bags (contractor, trash, gallon zip locks)
- House cleaning solvents
- Bug repellent (mosquitoes are vicious inside a hot, muggy, muddy flooded house)
- Fast Food (Buy several kinds of fast foods and just leave it. Someone will eat it and be thankful)
- Boxes filled with easy to eat snacks (chips, bars, nuts, and fun stuff)
- Paper plates, plastic utensils, cups, napkins
- Prepared Foods are nice, but more complicated
- Gift cards for food (this is for a dinner after a long day, they can get take out at their hotel or temporary place instead of having to cook)
- Gift cards to Marshalls, Target, Walmart, Lowes (they can get clothes, supplies, and other needs)
- Clean old or cheap t-shirts that can be worn as throw-always during clean up
- Clean bedding sheets, blankets, pillows

Stuff you can do

- Laundry (We loved this. People would come by and put a bunch of dirty clothes in a bag, wash, and return them folded to us)
- Write tasks that need to be done on big post it notes and put them on the wall near the entrance of the house or on a pop up table so people coming in can grab one and do the task. Tell them to try to write a new task on the wall to replace the one they did for someone else to do...create an auto filling to do board.
- Cut sheet rock, pull out flooring, and clean out house if you're involved with initial 24 hours
- Position and maintain fans throughout house
- help sort what's destroyed from what's still good (our rule: if flood water touched it, it's destroyed)
- Haul what's destroyed into piles in the yard for pick up by city
- Pack and label belongings that might still be good
- Stage "still good" boxes and load in a POD onsite; or on a rental truck for storage

I remember the first day after we flooded. The father of my son's girlfriend asked me what to do. I was still looking at all the loss so I struggled to give him any useful direction. He quickly realized the situation and said, "I'm going to separate good stuff from bad stuff." I nodded and he and some

other guys went to work. Hours later we had piles in the yard and the house was beginning to clean out. I have many examples of people who came from nowhere to help us in many ways, then left without ever knowing their names to thank.

After a flood, there's so much to do, just guess and you'll probably be doing something really helpful.

Last, there's "stuff you can share" that takes more time and commitment but means a lot

- Share your car or truck for rides, pick-ups, drop-offs
- Share your garage to store their stuff that survived
- Share your home for temporary living, food, showers or laundry (obvious, but important)

No one who has flooded wants to live with someone else or use their stuff. Understand how much it sucks to be so helpless, it's dehumanizing. The best thing you can do is quietly insist and get to it.

There is a lot to unpack here. For those who made it this far down the post, I hope you found it helpful.

There were so many people who opened their hearts, homes, and hard-working hands to us that I still get overwhelmed by their generosity. People are a lot of things, but what we witnessed in our hours, days, weeks, and months of need was on the pure side of love. Know that it's out there and it's there for you.

For our friends who flooded from Harvey, no need to leave a light on, we'll bring you a new one.