

After the Storm

A Guide for Caregivers of Individuals with Autism

The period after a hurricane can be as challenging as the storm itself. For individuals with autism, the disruption of familiar environments, routines, and supports can cause prolonged distress that looks different from typical post-storm stress. This guide covers what to expect and how to support your family member during recovery.

Returning Home

If your home sustained damage, your family member may react strongly to visual changes. A missing tree, a different-colored tarp on the roof, debris in the yard, or water stains inside can be deeply disorienting for someone who relies on environmental consistency.

What to do:

- If possible, visit the home before bringing your family member. Take photos so you can show them what to expect before they see it in person.
- Read the "Going Home After the Storm" social story (included in this packet) with your family member before the trip home. Read it multiple times.
- Prioritize restoring your family member's personal space first (their bedroom, their corner, their chair). Having one familiar anchor point reduces overall distress.
- Narrate changes as you encounter them: "The tree fell down. It will be cleaned up. Your room is still here." Simple, factual statements.
- Allow extra time for processing. Do not rush through the house. Let your family member move at their own pace.

Rebuilding Routines

Loss of routine is often the most destabilizing part of post-hurricane recovery for individuals with autism. School closures, therapy cancellations, and disrupted sleep schedules compound quickly.

What to do:

- Rebuild the daily visual schedule immediately, even if the content changes. A schedule with different activities is still better than no schedule at all.
- Keep wake times and bedtimes consistent, even if everything else shifts. Sleep is the foundation.
- If therapy services (ABA, speech, OT) are interrupted, contact your provider to ask about telehealth options or temporary modified schedules. Family Initiative can help coordinate: call 239-229-3515.
- If school is closed, create a simple daily structure: morning activity, lunch, afternoon activity, outdoor time (if safe), dinner, evening routine. It does not need to mimic school. It needs to be predictable.
- Use First/Then boards more frequently than usual during this period. They help bridge the gap when the full routine is not yet restored.

Recognizing Post-Storm Stress vs. Autism-Related Behaviors

After a hurricane, you may see changes in your family member's behavior. It can be difficult to distinguish trauma-related stress responses from baseline autism-related behaviors. Here are some patterns to watch for:

May Be Post-Storm Stress	More Likely Baseline ASD
New fears that did not exist before the storm (fear of rain, wind, loud sounds, dark)	Pre-existing sensory sensitivities that have increased in intensity
Sleep disruption (nightmares, difficulty falling asleep, waking frequently)	Sleep pattern changes due to environment change (new bed, new sounds, different lighting)
Regression in previously acquired skills (toileting, communication, self-care)	Skill fluctuation that was already present before the storm
Increased clinginess or refusal to separate from caregiver	Pre-existing difficulty with transitions or changes in who is present
New aggressive or self-injurious behaviors that were not part of the baseline	Increase in frequency of pre-existing behaviors due to disrupted routine

When to seek help: If you see new behaviors or significant regressions that persist for more than 2 to 3 weeks after returning home, contact your child's therapist or pediatrician. These may indicate a trauma response that benefits from professional support. Family Initiative can also connect you with resources: call 239-229-3515 or email info@fi-florida.org.

Managing Temporary Housing

If your home is not livable and your family must stay in a hotel, with relatives, or in temporary housing:

- Bring as many familiar items as possible from home (pillow, blanket, specific cup or plate, photos).
- Set up a small, consistent space that belongs to your family member. Even a corner of a room with their blanket and a few items creates a sense of ownership.
- Maintain the visual schedule. Tape it to a wall or stand it on a dresser. Routine travels with you.
- If staying with relatives or friends, brief them on your family member's needs: what helps, what to avoid, what behaviors to expect. People want to help but often do not know how.
- Keep social stories and communication boards accessible. Your family member may need them more during this period, not less.

Taking Care of Yourself

You cannot support your family member if you are running on empty. Post-hurricane recovery is exhausting for every family, and families affected by autism carry additional weight.

- Accept help when it is offered. Be specific about what you need: "Can you watch my child for one hour so I can handle the insurance call?"
- Contact Family Initiative if you need support navigating services, insurance, therapy re-scheduling, or school re-enrollment. That is what we are here for.
- Connect with other families through FI's programs. You are not the only one managing this.

Key Contacts

Family Initiative: 239-229-3515 | info@fi-florida.org | fi-florida.org

Lee County Emergency Management: 239-533-0622

FEMA Helpline: 1-800-621-3362 (TTY: 1-800-462-7585)

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741

211 (United Way): Dial 211 for local disaster recovery resources