Getting in touch during an emergency

Dear Alice,

It seems like there are more and more disasters and crises reported in the news lately. I live far from my family and many friends, and I'm a little concerned about not being able to get in touch with them if there is a disaster where they live or where I live. How can I keep in touch with my family and friends during an emergency?

Answer

Dear Reader,

With the whirlwind of emergencies on the news every day, you're most likely not alone in your concerns about being prepared if you're ever affected. Keeping in touch with family and friends during an emergency is helpful both for you and your loved ones' well-being and peace of mind. However, while your urge to connect with loved ones is natural, it's also good to remember that during an emergency, it's best not to make unnecessary phone calls, which might overwhelm communication systems and interfere with emergency responders' efforts. Regardless, you may still take steps to prepare your "just in case" options for reconnecting.

It's no surprise that emergencies might overwhelm phone systems, both because of calls to 911 and friends and family trying to get ahold of one another. If the phone systems stop working in your area, having a backup plan might help you find some way to keep in touch. You may consider preparing for emergencies by keeping an extra battery for your cell phone or making sure you always keep your cell phone fully charged. Traditional phone lines may still work in a blackout if cell phones don't, so finding a landline may help you connect (tip? just dial '0' from a landline if you need to call collect).

Coming up with a plan can also help prepare you for emergencies. This plan, adapted from Ready.gov, has some helpful tips. You may want to also check out their website for printouts that can guide you through the process of developing your own plan:

- **Make a family plan.** Decide with your loved ones who you'll call during an emergency. You may want to have several designated emergency contacts. This specific plan can differ based on your location, ages, language(s) you speak, medical needs, and more. Practicing this plan might also make all of you feel a little more prepared in case of emergency.

- **Try calling long-distance contacts.** It may be easier to call long-distance than to make a local call during an emergency in your area. In this case, plan to have a contact that
lives outside of your local calling area to call and update in case of an emergency.

- **Memorize a few key phone numbers.** In the age of cell phones, it can be easy to store numbers and never memorize them. Make sure you memorize the phone numbers of your family members and your designated out-of-town contacts. You can also have these numbers written down on a piece of paper that you store in your wallet or another place that you keep other key information.

- **Use email, texting, or websites.** In the case that Internet service is working in your area, try sending emails or updating your social networking profile with your status. Additionally, sometimes text messages go through, even when cell phone calls aren't connecting.

Keep in mind that one of the most useful tools during an emergency may be older sources: television and radio. News stations may continue to broadcast key information. You can keep a battery operated radio and spare batteries handy, just in case. In addition to establishing a communication plan, you may find that it can ease your worries to have other preparations made in advance, such as pet care, extra food and water, and additional medical supplies. Although it may seem like a burden to worry about these things before they happen, a little advanced planning can help you feel a lot better.

Best of luck getting in touch,

Alice!

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