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OLDER ADULTS' EXPERIENCES OF A FLOOD DISASTER: MAKING SENSE OF AN EXTRAORDINARY EVENT

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Abstract

Disasters occur within the routines of everyday life and have a disruptive and destructive impact on human lives. To understand how older individuals make sense of a disaster, nine older adults in Kaitaia, New Zealand were interviewed about their experience of a flood they experienced in July 2007. These interviews were conducted with four residents living in a rest home and five pensioners living independently who were evacuated from their homes. The two groups differed in the levels of support and assistance received before, during, and after the disaster. The rest home residents experienced little disruption and did not require relocation; the pensioners experienced major disruption and relocation.

Thematic analysis was used to describe how these older adults' accounted for their experiences of the flood. The narratives were influenced by the participants' identity as either dependent rest home residents or pensioners living independently in the community. The analysis revealed that their accounts of the disaster were incorporated and integrated into the personal and social context of each person's life story. Narrative themes that emerged from the analysis for the pensioner group were: coping with limited assistance, the importance of treasured possessions, and social support and community. The pensioner themes reflected their vulnerability to a disaster and the challenges they faced during the post disaster recovery phase. Themes for the rest home residents were ageing and dependency, and the importance of protection, care, and trust. These themes reflected the dependent world of the rest home residents and the security of being cared for.

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