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,

Keeping in touch with family and friends during an emergency is important both for you and your loved ones' wellbeing and peace of mind. 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 can overwhelm the system and interfere with emergency responders' efforts.

It's no surprise that emergencies can overwhelm phone systems, both because of calls to 911 and frantic friends and family trying to get ahold of one another. If the phone systems stop working in your area, having a backup plan should help you find some way to keep in touch. You might consider preparing for emergencies by keeping an extra battery for your cell phone, and/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 land line may help you get through (tip ? just dial '0' from a land line if you need to call collect).

Coming up with a plan can help prepare you for emergencies. This plan, adapted from Ready.gov [2], has some good tips:

- **Make a family plan.** Decide with your loved ones who you will call to update with your status during an emergency. You may want to have several emergency contacts that everyone knows to call and update.
- **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, you should plan to have a contact that lives outside of your local calling area for each family member 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.
- **Use email, texting, and/or websites.** In the case that Internet service is working in your area, try sending emails and/or updating your social-networking profile with your status. Additionally, sometimes text messages will 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 old reliable sources: television and radio. News stations will continue to broadcast important information. You can keep a battery operated radio and spare batteries handy, just in case.

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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Published date:
Sep 19, 2008
Last reviewed on:
Mar 04, 2015

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