Disasters take an emotional toll on each person to varying degrees, whether directly or indirectly affected. The journey is not always linear, and in fact, often phases of the emotional life cycle of a disaster repeat or last longer than one might originally think.

Immediately after the impact of an event, there are heroic efforts (rescues, etc.), during a period called the honeymoon phase. It is also recognized by community cohesion. Normally, following this period there is an emotional crash characterized by disillusion and perhaps a feeling of abandonment. From that low place, one starts working through grief coupled with the difficulties applying for benefits, filing insurance claims, etc. When there are anniversaries or trigger events, such as a new storm, negative emotions return accompanied by another wave of hopelessness. The length of the cycle can take up to five years or more. Keep in mind the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance)—as this grief period superimposes itself in the disillusionment stage as well. People may return to their low place for a time, and start climbing up again to the new normal, defined as reconstruction, or a new beginning.

Now, in the elongated emotional life cycle of a disaster, most appropriately associated with events such as pandemics, the honeymoon stage will peak earlier with some community cohesion or joint confusion caused by not understanding the pandemic itself or misinformation. The period of disillusionment becomes elongated as well as the working through grief stage. It can take months or longer depending on such things as the availability of treatments or vaccines as well as the ability to contain the spread, and the mortality rate. The grief stage will likely be longer with more depression and anger than with natural disasters. It could take 20-25 years to reach the reconstruction stage after a pandemic.