Recovering From Hurricanes & Other Disasters

It is common for people to experience very strong emotional reactions during and following hurricanes and other large disasters and their accompanying damage to homes and community infrastructures.

If you are experiencing distress in the wake of a recent disaster you are not alone.

Understanding common responses to extreme events can help you to cope effectively with your feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.

Some people respond immediately, while others have delayed reactions—sometimes months or even years later.

Some have adverse effects for a long period of time, while others recover rather quickly. And reactions can change over time.

Some who have suffered from trauma are energized initially by the event to help them with the challenge of coping, only to later become discouraged or depressed.

A number of factors affect the length of time people need to recover from the storm, including:

- Degree of intensity and loss; duration of exposure to the events and damage of the events;
- A person's general ability to cope with emotionally challenging situations; other stressful events preceding the traumatic experience.

Individuals faced with other emotionally challenging situations; such as serious health problems or family-related difficulties, may have more intense reactions to the new stressful event and need more time to recover.

Some people are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands of a disaster by using their own support systems.

It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems persist and continue to interfere with daily living. For example, some may feel overwhelming nervousness or lingering sadness that adversely affects interpersonal relationships, academic or job performance.

Individuals with ongoing reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a mental health professional.

If you have utilized the counseling and psychological services previously, it may be helpful to reestablish contact at this time. If you have not used the services before you may find it to be helpful to make an appointment during these times of transition to help you recover.

Call 409.747.9508 to make an appointment

http://www.utmb.edu/CAPS/

When should I seek professional help

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Shock and Denial are typical responses to traumatic events and disasters, especially shortly after the event. As the initial shock subsides, reactions will vary from one person to another. The following, however, are normal responses to a traumatic event:

1. Feelings become intense and sometimes unpredictable. You may become more irritable than usual, and your mood may change back and forth dramatically. You might be especially anxious or nervous, or even become depressed.

2. You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event. These are called flashbacks and they may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heart beat or sweating.

3. You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused. Sleeping and eating patterns also may be disrupted.

4. Recurring emotional reactions are common. Reactions can be prompted by sights and smells that remind you of preparing for or responding to the hurricane. These sensory perceptions can trigger fear that the hurricane or its damage may reoccur.

5. Interpersonal relationships often become strained. Greater conflict, such as more frequent arguments with family members and peers, is common. On the other hand, you might become withdrawn and isolated and avoid your usual activities.

6. Physical symptoms may accompany the extreme stress. For example, headaches, nausea and chest pain may result and may require medical attention. Pre-existing medical conditions may worsen due to the stress.

How can I help myself and my family?

There are a number of steps you can take to help restore emotional well being and a sense of control in the wake of hurricanes or other disasters.

1. Recognize that this is a challenging time, but it is one that you can manage.

2. Allow yourself to be sad over the losses you have experienced. Be patient with changes in your emotional state.

3. Take a news break. Watching replays of footage from the news broadcasters can make your stress even greater. Often, the media tries to interest viewers by presenting worst case scenarios. These may not be representative of your home or community.

4. Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathize with your situation. But keep in mind that your typical support system may be weakened if those who are close to you also have experienced or witnessed the hurricane.

5. Communicate your experience in whatever ways feel comfortable to you - such as by talking with family or close friends or keeping a diary.

6. Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience difficulties sleeping, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques.

7. Avoid alcohol and drugs since these can increase a sense of depression and/or impede you from doing what is necessary to be resilient and cope with events.

8. Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.

9. If possible Avoid major life decisions such as switching jobs because these activities tend to be highly stressful.

Ways To Build Resilience

Make connections. Good relationships with close family members, friends, or others are important. Even for those separated from their families, connections can be maintained with peers, academic staff and faculty during transitions. Some people find that even though they themselves have suffered losses during a disaster, being active and helping others makes them feel good about themselves.

Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems. You can't undo the events of a disaster, but you can change how you interpret or even internalize the recent events. Try to see beyond the current crisis and identify a short term plan, no matter how small. Note any subtle changes in your thoughts, feelings or behavior may somewhat decrease the stressors as you deal with difficult situations.

Change is always happening. Certain goals may be attainable in different ways as a result of a disaster. Acknowledging circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can alter.

Make a schedule. Develop functional schedule, identify specific things you will do in the morning, middle of the day and in the evening –even if it seems like a small accomplishment --that enables you to move toward something that is tangible. Instead of focusing on things that seem unachievable, ask yourself, "What's one thing I know I can accomplish “next” that helps me move in the direction I want to go?"

Take decisive actions. Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive actions, rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away. Although disasters uproot people from their normal routines, establish new routines as soon as you can.