

Coping with Hurricane Stress

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This hurricane season in Florida has impacted not only those who have been directly in the paths of hurricanes Charlie, Frances and Ivan, but those around the state who have experienced numerous disruptions. Floridians have suffered disruptions to their family and work lives.

Those working long hours under difficult conditions providing police, fire, EMS, utility, transportation and street maintenance services pull double duty to restore our services, while they have the same challenges at home that we all face. These individuals are owed a great debt of gratitude for their labors on our behalf. We should all take a little time to write a letter or personally thank those who did a fantastic and orderly job of helping us all recover from hurricanes Frances and Charlie and those who no doubt will be there to help recover from hurricane Ivan.

On top of a certain degree of stress burden we all share from global terrorism, domestic economic strains, a contentious election, the strains of ongoing war and the associated threats to those serving our country, the recent hurricanes have further taxed all of our psychological resources.

Disruptions to family life might involve time required to prepare and clean up after storms as well as endure power losses or loss of our normal water resources. Damage to our homes and/or loss of possessions can have a disorienting influence and leave people feeling personally vulnerable. Overcast weather, loss of the comforts of air conditioning and the heat may make it difficult to sleep and further contribute to people being on edge.

Stress levels since the recent hurricanes have run high, as often do after disruptions which change our routines or might result in losses, displacement, repairs, extra expenses or lost income.

While research tends to show that the traumatic effects of natural occurrences such as hurricanes are less severe psychologically than man-made disasters such as the Sept. 11 attacks, many individuals may find themselves weary or irritable. As the immediate threat passes, we may let our guard down and tend to show some of our

worst coping skills. Tempers are short and there is a tendency to want to shut down, strike out, or withdraw.

Successful coping involves a return to our normal routines and health habits. Eating, sleeping and exercising are keys to restoring our biological and psychological defenses.

Exercise as well as distractions such as reading or watching a light or comical movie can help provide stress relief. Taking walks and getting some fresh air in the morning if the sun peaks out can be restorative. Even going to a large mall, taking a brisk walk and enjoying a cup of coffee can help relieve some of the shut-in feeling and give us a break from the gloomy weather.

While there often are many things that need to be done, balancing this with some pleasurable activities or treats for the family can help break a siege mentality and ever increasing levels of stress. Often times, talking with neighbors can help normalize reactions and allow one to vent, as well as improve a sense of community which tends to help buffer tendencies to feel alone or withdraw under stress. For many, the opportunity to provide assistance to others helps reduce a sense of being powerless, though one must be careful to avoid caregiver burnout. Balance is the key.

Stressful events often impact the family. Finding activities for children may seem a low priority when the tasks of preparing or cleaning up for a hurricane are pressing, but it is far easier to manage children by giving them something interesting to do than telling them what not to do.

These events often provide modeling opportunities for good coping skills. Do problem solve, communicate, listen to input, provide reassurance as this is comforting for those even more helpless than ourselves. Dealing with the difficulties and crises which may arise such as repairs, bills, power outages, etc. in a calm manner will help reduce the stress on our children and families. Remember that children may feel even more helpless than we do and that if we as parents convey the message by words, action or even by our emotional tone that we don't know what to do or are overwhelmed, their sense of support and safety becomes threatened.

A soft, calm and reassuring tone, as well as firm direction can help reduce the sense of confusion and distress children may feel. Try to maintain their routines as much as practically possible but don't sweat the small stuff.

Expect some behavioral regression in terms of the children, but maintain important limits. Under stress, we may tend to feel we do not have time and may tend neglect caretaking activities for our loved ones and children. This often backfires in terms of needing to spend time in conflicts or misbehavior that tends to arise under stress. Some extra time devoting some individual attention playing a game or engaging in a

mutually enjoyable activity will go a long way in providing a sense that things are not all that bad and in avoiding undesired behavior for attention.

Maintaining perspective, avoiding getting overfocused on all that must be done or could happen, sharing experiences with others, conveying optimistic messages and maintaining a sense of humor are all good coping skills. Hopefully, practicing these skills will help smooth the transition to less stressful and more enjoyable times and help us all develop into better leaders. Stressful events can often bring out the best as well as the worst in us, and it is important to exercise our efforts and model our best leadership skills for the benefit of our spouses, children and our community.

As with most stressful and traumatic experiences, these events can wear down the best of us, let alone people who may already be suffering from mood or anxiety disorders, recovering from alcoholism, or dealing with what Freud once called “the everyday miseries of daily life” such as marital strain, economic hardships, work conflicts, loneliness, etc. A brief period of feeling tired or run down is not unusual. Rest and getting back to our healthier routines should help.

Be alert for more persisting changes in mood or anxiety. Should irritability, depressed mood, appetite or sleep changes, motivation difficulties, difficulties concentrating, persisting nightmares, feelings of hopelessness or a sense of panic and desperation last more than several days to two weeks, seek consultation from a licensed psychiatrist or psychologist.