

Managing Traumatic Stress: Dealing with Hurricanes from Afar

Even if your community is not in the path of a hurricane, you may experience a sense of distress or vulnerability by living close by or watching news reports about the storm's possible impact and damage. This can be especially true if you have family or friends who may be affected by the hurricane and you are unsure about their safety and well being. You may also feel distress if you have been personally affected by previous hurricanes.

Here are some tips to manage your distress:

- Take a news break. Watching weather reporters speculate about the intensity and likely landfall, or actual storm footage when the hurricane arrives, can make your stress levels higher. Although you'll want to keep informed, take a break from watching continual coverage.
- Control what you can. There are routines in your life that you can continue. It is helpful to maintain these routines and schedules to give yourself a break from constantly thinking about the hurricane.
- Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with storm-related stress. Eat well-balanced meals, engage in regular exercise like going for a long walk, and get plenty of rest. Bolstering your physical well-being is good for your emotional health.
- Keep things in perspective. While hurricanes often create hardship and loss, remember to focus as well on the things that are good in your life.
- Find a productive way to help if you can. Many organizations are set up to provide various forms of aid to victims of natural disasters. Contributing or volunteering can be a way to take a positive action and to gain a sense of "control" over the event.
- Look for opportunities for self-discovery and recognize your strengths. People often learn something about themselves and may find that they have grown in some respect as a result of persevering through hardship. Many people who have experienced tragedy and adversity have reported better relationships, greater sense of personal strength even while feeling vulnerable, increased sense of self-worth, deeper spirituality and heightened appreciation for life.

Here are some additional recommendations:

For many people, using the tips mentioned above may be sufficient to get them through the current crisis. At times, however, an individual can get stuck or have difficulty managing intense reactions. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can assist you in developing an appropriate strategy for moving

forward. It is important to get professional help if you feel like you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living. You can find psychologists near you by contacting your state psychological association. Many of these psychologists are trained in trauma and disaster work.

Persevere and trust in your ability to get through the challenging days ahead.

(Special thanks for help from Raymond F. Hanbury, PhD, ABPP, and Eva D. Sivan, PhD. Adapted from “Managing Traumatic Stress: Dealing with the Hurricanes from Afar (2005),” “Tips for Managing Your Distress Related to the Wildfires” and “Tips for College and University Students: Managing Your Distress in the Aftermath of School Shootings.”)

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