

Managing Traumatic Stress: Tips for Managing Distress Related to Hurricane Gustav

It is common for people to experience very strong emotional reactions with the arrival of a hurricane and its accompanying damage to homes and community infrastructures. If you are experiencing distress in the wake of Hurricane Gustav, you are not alone. Understanding common responses to extreme events can help you to cope effectively with your feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Putting into practice some of the tips in this guide can help you along the path to managing the storm's aftermath and feeling better.

What happens to people when there is a hurricane or other traumatic event?

Shock and denial are typical responses to traumatic events and disasters, especially shortly after the event. Both shock and denial are normal protective reactions.

Shock is a sudden and often intense disturbance of your emotional state that may leave you feeling stunned or dazed. Denial involves your not acknowledging that something very stressful has happened, or not experiencing fully the intensity of the event. You may temporarily feel numb or disconnected from life. Both are normal responses.

As the initial shock subsides, reactions will vary from one person to another. The following, however, are normal responses to a traumatic event:

- 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.
- Thoughts and behavior patterns may be affected by the trauma. 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. You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused. Sleeping and eating patterns also

may be disrupted.

- 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.

- 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 On the other hand, you might become withdrawn and isolated and avoid your usual activities.

- 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 do people respond differently over time?

It is important to realize that there is not one standard pattern of reaction to the extreme stress of traumatic experiences. 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 tend to affect the length of time people need to recover from the storm, including:

- The degree of intensity and loss. Events that last longer and pose a greater threat, and where loss of life or substantial loss of property is involved, often take longer to resolve.

- The duration of exposure to the events and damage of the events can have an impact on those involved.

- A person's general ability to cope with emotionally challenging situations. Individuals who have handled other difficult, stressful circumstances well may

find it easier to cope with the trauma.

- 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.

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 the hurricane or other traumatic experience, including the following:

- Recognize that this is a challenging time but one that you can work to manage. You've tackled hardships at other times in your life. Tap into the skills you used to get through past challenges.

- Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.

- Take a news break. Watching replays of footage from the hurricane 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.

- 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.

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

- Find out about local support groups led by appropriately trained and experienced professionals. Support groups are often available in communities following large-scale disasters. People can experience relief and comfort connecting with other hurricane survivors who have had similar reactions and emotions. These can be especially helpful for people with limited personal support systems.

- 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. 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.
- 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.
- If possible, avoid major life decisions such as switching jobs because these activities tend to be highly stressful.

When should I seek professional help?

Some people are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands of the hurricane 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 and job performance. □ Individuals with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional.

Psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers help educate people about normal responses to extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact. Psychologists and other crisis counselors are deployed to the affected areas. Ask the various organizations providing assistance to direct you to those individuals.

With children, continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the hurricane, continued and extreme withdrawal and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional can help such children and their parents understand and deal with thoughts, feelings and behaviors that result from the storm.

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