

## After the Storm – Coping with Disaster

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Everyone in Florida was affected by the recent Hurricanes; we in Brevard County were most affected by Hurricane Frances. Whether we know of someone who lost their home, watched it on television or lost our electricity or home ourselves we are all experiencing the event together. As we all experience the disaster at different levels, we all have different reactions to this unusual and disturbing time. Psychologists have long been mobilized into crisis teams in an effort to help people cope with the effects of disaster.

### What to Expect

As each day passes, people will move from feelings of nervousness, frustration, anger, disbelief and concern about the unknown. We are all asking ourselves – “Why?” This state of Limbo – waiting for electricity, food, water, gas, insurance monies and most of all waiting for things to return to normal while the rest of the country just seems to pass us by is a state that begs us to be patient. We have feelings that we have no control over our environment or our circumstance, and while we have no control over some things, we must remember that we do have control over others. We can control our reactions, and of our behavior. We have control over the decisions that we make from moment to moment to get through this crisis. We have control of over how we respond to each new challenge of each new day. The lesson learned in the aftermath of this storm is **patience** and the realization that things will return to some semblance of normal. Survivors of Hurricane Andrew in 1992 will say that things do return to the way they once were – familiar and comfortable.

### Adults

Specifically for adults, the frustration and nervousness becomes manifest as irritability and anger. Sometimes we may gaze off into the distance overwhelmed by the enormity of our circumstance. We may want to escape and think of moving to a different location that does not experience hurricanes. We may cry quietly fearful of the unpredictable future. These reactions are all normal. Overtime these reactions will lessen and be replaced by resolve – a fighting spirit – knowing that we can overcome this challenge as we have overcome challenges in the past.

### Children

Specifically for children, the lack of consistent structure and unpredictability of the event results in intense fear and irritability. Some children may fear the dark, some may fear the wind, and some may fear storms and some may be fearful

that things will never be the way they once were. All of these reactions are normal in the short-term. Children must be reassured that everything will eventually be okay. They must be able to look into their caregiver's eyes and know that they both survived and can slowly grow to trust that their schedule will return to normal and that life is basically predictable. While discipline and limits must be upheld, parents must understand that children express anxiety and sadness in many different ways that can include misbehavior.

### When to seek therapy

According to the diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association, short-term reactions to crisis that are considered normal such as fear and nightmares, and sadness can quickly evolve over time into reactions that are considered concerning such as:

- Suicidal thoughts and plans,
- An inability to think about anything other than the traumatic event,
- Recurrent nightmares,
- Flashbacks of the disaster experience
- Efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings associated with the trauma
- Feeling detached from others
- Sense of a shortened future
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep

Group psychotherapy and private individual psychotherapy are both helpful methods that have been researched as effective with individuals who have experienced a crisis. Group psychotherapy is most effective for people who get support from sharing with others, and individual psychotherapy is most effective for those who prefer a one-on-one relationship with a therapist.

### Who to Contact for Help

There are many local agencies that can help you to find a reputable therapist, a master's level therapist or psychologist trained to address trauma issues. Here are some places to turn to for help:

- Your church family
- Your spiritual home
- 211 for information on mental health referrals
- American Psychological Association
- Florida Psychological Association

### Coping with Stress

The best way to cope with stress is to regain control of our lives and our surroundings. This can be accomplished by returning to a routine ASAP, as much as our current circumstances allow.

- Focus on the positive – everyday there are new signs that show us that things are returning to normal
- Create a guide of places that are open and offer the materials or supplies that you need
- Rely on basic common sense and survival techniques
- There are locations that appear unscathed by the storm – visit them
- Walk around the Mall for air-conditioning if your power is out
- Visit a library to read in a calm and comfortable environment for an hour a day
- Create a schedule that offers you downtime, and allows you to take care of needs
- Return to school or work as soon as possible in an order to busy your mind with familiar tasks
- Discuss events with friends
- Rely on family and friends for support
- Pray for strength
- Reward yourself with a familiar treat when you have overcome a daily challenge

Finally, picture yourself a year from now the same or better than you were a year ago and know that this crisis shall pass.