

Survivors' guilt creeps in Bad feelings prompt many to help victims or spiral into something more serious, experts warn

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Terri Bruce admits she has it and national trauma expert Dr. Charles R. Figley confirms it exists. With the Gulf Coast being pounded by hurricane after hurricane — not one but two years in a row — it is no surprise people are suffering.

Meet survivors' guilt. The irony is survivors' guilt doesn't just affect those who physically fled or survived hurricanes Charley, Frances, Jeanne, Ivan and now Katrina, and Rita. There is more to it. Although some Brevard County residents suffered major hurricane damage last year, some feel tremendous guilt about the Katrina-ravaged Gulf Coast. Terri Bruce of Indian Harbour Beach, for example, has no connection to that area, but questions why countless Floridians were spared.

Problem signs

People who have some connection to the areas, such as relatives and friends could be having some problems. The concern could turn into something more serious if a person isn't careful. According to Dr. Charles Figley, director of the Florida State University Traumatology Institute in Tallahassee, survivors' guilt may be the underlying force behind :

- Depression
- Outpouring of generosity
- An inability to sleep in the wake of hurricane tragedies.
- Heavy use of alcohol and drugs
- Nightmares
- Jitters and anxiousness
- Frequent involuntary crying
- Suicidal thoughts

The bigger question is , Why would they feel guilty? said Figley, a Fulbright fellow and the director of the Florida State University Traumatology Institute in Tallahassee. "People feel guilty because of the images we see and the history we have in this country," he said. "For example, there's a collective sense of guilt about racism, which has been a part of this country for as long as it has existed. "When we see injustice and a lack of sensitivity and response, it makes all of us feel guilty, angry certainly. And it can happen after any catastrophe."

Survivors' guilt can be applied not only to survivors of accidents and crashes, serious illnesses and violent crimes, Figley said. It also touches those impacted directly or indirectly by man-made and natural catastrophes and events: The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Indian Ocean tsunami, Oklahoma City bombing, the Holocaust, earthquakes, hurricanes and wars.

Although Terri Bruce's house in Indian Harbour Beach suffered major hurricane damage last year, there is still guilt over Katrina-ravaged Louisiana. "I've been working out in my yard and because it's dry, I put the sprinklers on," said Bruce, a former emergency room nurse and owner of a housecleaning company. "And yet, people are pumping out water in New Orleans. How can you get up each morning and not feel guilty?"

Bruce has no connection to Louisiana, but viewed the destruction on television and in the newspaper. So even while repairing her own cracked swimming pool, ripped apart porch enclosure and ruined roof, Bruce questions why countless Floridians were spared. "It's a guilt over the fact that we walked away from three major hurricanes and they had one and look at the devastation," Bruce added.

"I think everyone has survivors' guilt to a measure, that is, anybody

with a conscious or a heart."Many people don't realize survivors' guilt may be responsible for an outpouring of generosity, said Dr. Monique Levermore, a Melbourne psychologist. "Floridians in general have been in the bull's eye of hurricanes for years now and when Katrina or Rita bypasses the state, they have an instant connection to the emotions that are being experienced by victims in the other states," Levermore said. "There is a feeling of guilt associated with this because it's hard to go on with our normal lives knowing we were spared and they were hit, "she added. To combat the guilty feeling, people do what they can to help the less fortunate, such as donating money, time, and even housing thousands of the hurricane victims who fled New Orleans.

"For those reaching out and helping, people tend to conceptualize guilt feelings as a negative thing and that's not necessarily the case," Levermore said. That's because guilt can move people to be more caring and compassionate. It can also move people to better prepare for future hurricanes."Guilt motivates you to do all that you can to avoid ending up like the person you feel guilty about," Figley said.

Is it 'guilt?'

Palm Bay resident Terrilyene Nunez isn't so sure the word "guilt" explains how she feels these days. "I don't know if you can call it guilt," said Nunez. "But it is an emotion, a sadness that makes you stop and think about how blessed you are."Whatever the emotion, people are placing value on more important things in life, such as relationships."What happens is that you begin to value less the piece of furniture, "Nunez said."And the interchange between you and other humans begins to take on more importance, importance that should have been there before that lady lifted her skirt and showed us what she had, "referring to Hurricane Katrina.

There is a fine line between survivors' guilt and post traumatic stress disorder, experts say. While survivors' guilt can plague anyone, the more serious mental disorder of PTSD only impacts those who are directly traumatized by an event. Plus, PTSD sufferers can also experience survivors' guilt. The symptoms of PTSD can include nightmares, flashbacks to the traumatic event, depression and possibly suicidal thoughts. It requires professional treatment.

Survivors' guilt typically doesn't require professional intervention, but people who experience it can seek support from family and friends. "Guilt is a sense of responsibility for and to others who got it worst than you," Figley said. "Frequently for people who commit suicide, there is more than survivors' guilt going on. They've experienced a long series of difficulties and depression."

However, survivors' guilt can spiral into something more serious if a person isn't careful. An inability to sleep, heavy use of alcohol and drugs, nightmares, constant images of suffering people, jitters and involuntary crying on a regular basis are signs of a more serious condition. "If they can't get it out of their mind and can't do anything to scratch the itch of survivors' guilt, such as making donations, then they might need to talk to someone," Figley warned.

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