

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AFTERMATH OF KATRINA by Mary Lynn Crow, Ph.D.

This week we may have seen America's worst natural disaster in one hundred years and certainly during our life time. How do we cope emotionally? How do we help our children cope emotionally? These issues loom large for us even as people in three states try to physically survive. Finding food, water, shelter, medical care, transportation, and even a dry spot are priorities. Finding emotional support is also becoming a priority for them and for us. This type of tragedy is not one that can be easily fixed as homes and businesses and cities may never be repaired. Fears and stress now may lead later to depression and posttraumatic stress disorder. Begin now to take action!

Common reactions to stress of this nature include:

- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation; difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- Apathy and emotional numbing
- Nightmares and reoccurring thoughts about the event
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness and depression
- Feeling powerless
- Changes in eating patterns; loss of appetite or overeating
- Excessive crying
- Headaches, back pains and stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping or falling asleep
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs <sup>1</sup>

Pre-school age children may react with nightmares, bed-wetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, fear of sleeping alone, complaints of physical aches and pains, and by physically clinging to parents. School children may experience some of these symptoms but particularly need to find answers to questions about what will happen to the children hurt in Katrina's path as well as whether or not it will ever happen to them. Adolescents may either overreact emotionally or try to completely downplay their worries. They may also, like younger children, express their fears through acting out or regressing to younger behavior.

For everyone, but particularly for young children, avoid focusing on television or newscasts and graphic media photos. For those who are most seriously effected by the tragedy, the more media exposure they experience, the more traumatic their response. For anyone who has been through severe previous disasters, this one will probably reawaken a lot of previous memories as well. Getting children to verbalize their feelings is a great first step. Acting out fears can be much more of a problem than putting them into words. Once the child begins to talk, just listen and then try to answer questions in a simple, honest manner. If your child currently has a mental health problem or is involved in some current (or even was in some earlier) trauma, today's

<sup>1</sup> [www.nmha.org/reassurance/hurricane/stress.cfm](http://www.nmha.org/reassurance/hurricane/stress.cfm)

emotional response may be even more exaggerated. Preschoolers may need reassurance in the form of physical attention like hugs and cuddling. School age children may be more likely to initiate the conversation. When responding to your child, this would be a good time to share your own feelings along with your religious or philosophical beliefs, and even perhaps to acknowledge that you can't always understand everything either. Because children model their coping behaviors after the adults around them, you'll also need to take good care of yourself and to deal appropriately with your own feelings of anxiety or sadness.

Next to simply talking it out, giving children positive ways to physically work out their negative feelings is advised. Let them draw or paint pictures, write stories, poems, or letters, and get involved in projects to help the victims. Taking some kind of positive action can be therapeutic.<sup>2</sup>

The American Psychological Association makes these recommendations:

- Even if you were not in the actual disaster, you may experience a sense of vulnerability from witnessing the results of the disaster. This can be especially acute if a relative or friend was affected by the disaster, particularly if you have been unable to get news on their welfare.
- Take a news break. Watching endless replays of footage from the disaster can make your stress even greater. Although you'll want to keep informed - especially if you have loved ones affected by the disaster - take a break from watching the news.
- Be kind to yourself. Some feelings when witnessing a disaster may be difficult for you to accept. You may feel relief that the disaster did not touch you, or you may feel guilt that you were left untouched when so many were affected. Both feelings are common.
- Keep things in perspective. Although a disaster often is horrifying, you should 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 financial or other aid to victims of natural disasters. Contributing can be a way to gain some "control" over the event.
- Control what you can. There are routines in your life that you can continue and sometimes you need to do those and take a break from even thinking about the disaster.
- 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.<sup>3</sup>

Individuals with prolonged emotional reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional.

<sup>2</sup> Terrorist Attacks Pose New Threats for Children

<sup>3</sup> [www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=107](http://www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=107)

Resources:

American Psychological Association (2005). *Managing traumatic stress: After hurricane Katrina*. Retrieved September 1, 2005 from [www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=107](http://www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=107)

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