

Hurricane Fatigue

A woman calls me and tells me she does not know what is wrong with her. She reports, “I can’t seem to get it together”. A first responder falls apart emotionally for apparently no reason. A couple walks into their accountant’s office and after a few minutes one of them breaks down and begins to cry. A lawyer hears of another storm in the gulf and he has troubling focusing on his work for the day. What do these situations have in common? Each of these incidents happened within the past 30 days and they all experienced Hurricane Katrina three years ago on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Many local people don’t want to remember the devastation that occurred from Hurricane Katrina three years ago. If you would have been on the gulf coast in the weeks and months after Katrina it looked as if an incendiary bomb went over leveling and destroying everything in its path. In August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina became the deadliest hurricane in the United States in 70 years and the most expensive natural disaster in United States history. More than 500,000 people were evacuated and an estimated 1,600 people lost their lives and more than 1,000 people were missing.

Thirty-six months out from the storm and many people are not coping well as we are in the midst of another hurricane season. Why are people having problems coping with this year’s storms when we live in a part of the United States that has a hurricane season each year running from June 1st – November 30th? Looking at some of the key findings that came from this monster storm in 2005 may help identify the issues surrounding today’s hurricane fatigue.

Studies:

In a report published in *The Annals of Emergency Medicine* by the International Medical Corps. This survey was from men and women living in FEMA trailers in Mississippi and Louisiana in April –May 2006.

- People living in FEMA trailers in Louisiana and Mississippi were 15 times more likely to take their own lives than people in the rest of the United States
- The survey found the rate of depression among trailer park residents was seven times the national average. Moreover, since displacement, suicide attempts were roughly 79 times higher than before the disaster.
- In documenting domestic violence, the study revealed that intimate partner violence after displacement was nearly triple the yearly baseline rates reported before displacement.
- Rapes reported since displacement were nearly 54 times the national yearly average.
- 49% of respondents did not feel safe walking in their community at night. In addition, of respondents with children, 45% did not feel safe letting their children play in the trailer parks during the day.

In the Hurricane Katrina Community Advisory Group researchers led by a team from Harvard Medical School reported their initial findings in late 2006:

- 11.3% of respondents had a serious mental illness 5 to 8 months after Hurricane Katrina (up from 6.1% in the pre-hurricane survey).
- 19.9% had mild to moderate mental illness (compared with 9.7% before).

Red Cross data shows another side of the devastation:

- Data from the Red Cross Damage Assessments shows that 68,729 single family dwellings, apartments, and mobile homes were destroyed by Katrina in forty seven (47) counties of Mississippi. In Jackson County the number of destroyed dwellings was 23,250.
- 39% of the 68,729 structures destroyed occurred in Harrison County, 34% in Jackson County, Mississippi and 20% in Hancock County. 93% of the structures destroyed in Mississippi occurred in the three coastal counties of Mississippi.
- The suicide rate doubled in Jackson County in 2006, a year after the storm.
- In 2006-2007 each caseworker in Jackson County handled 35 ongoing cases, Harrison County, 25 cases and Hancock County 15 cases. Caseworkers were pushed to their limits in assisting those in need of services to rebuild homes.
- Beginning in the 5th month after Hurricane Katrina through the 14 month post Katrina nine (9) teenagers died in traffic accidents in Jackson County.

In a Medscape Medical News article, *Hurricane Katrina Survivors Face Increasing Mental Health Problems* showed an unexpected increase in mental illness. Researches found almost two years after the disaster, the percentage of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome almost doubled. Serious mental illness rose 14%, suicide ideation rose to 6.4% (from 2.8%) and suicide plans went up to 5% (from 1%). The percentage of people with mood or anxiety disorders also rose. In a recent University of Mississippi study one in five Gulf Coast residents likely experienced post-traumatic stress disorder because of Katrina.

During 2007 I attended a meeting with a group of volunteers. One of the comments made by a participant, "Once we get back in our homes everyone will be okay." There is a common misconception that once you are in your rebuilt home everything will be ok. Unfortunately that is not always the case.

Hurricane Katrina is referred to on the gulf coast as "the storm". With more than 68,000 homes, apartments and businesses completely destroyed in Mississippi by the storm, removed by the water and/or wind in Mississippi that fateful day, it has changed things for many gulf coast residents. You hear people say, "I don't know if I can deal with another storm like that", or "One more, that's it", or "I'm leaving if we have another Katrina" or "it's just not worth rebuilding." Others will say this is the gulf coast and it goes with living on the gulf, get used to it.

Why the increase two years later? Normally in a disaster those symptoms listed above tend to subside within 12 months after a disaster. Based on these findings in a post-Katrina living environment the symptoms increased. Possibly the size and the catastrophic nature of this immense storm which has prolonged recovery for many may

answer some of the questions why symptoms are lingering. Also, there is nothing to compare Katrina to. 9/11 was a tragic and unprecedented event, however; it was localized in small contained areas. This event covered 90,000 square miles, across five states.

Stress Symptoms:

Some of the normal symptoms people experienced after the storm were an inability to focus, mind racing, heart palpitations, increased irritability, unable to relax, chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, anxiety, fear, mood swings, feelings of a “knot” in the stomach that won’t go away, lethargic, low energy, headaches which lead to additional symptoms of depression, not wanting to face the day, cannot get out of bed, and for some, suicidal thoughts.

Because the symptoms have lingered on additional stressors come into play. A person is busy rebuilding their home, going to work, managing a family and in addition dealing with the normal stress of everyday life that one encounters. When stress builds up and is not attended to, it is like termites infesting a foundation of a home. In three-four months termites do very little damage to the foundation of a home, but if the termites go unchecked, we know what they do to a foundation. When stress goes unattended for months and then years, serious consequences set in. People do not die of a lack of concentration or because their mind is racing, or they are irritable, but eventually, over time emotional symptoms also known as “warning signs” manifest into physical symptoms and those indicators develop into more serious symptoms when preventative measures are not taken.

A doctor told me that a heart attack is a “heart under attack”. He said the attack on the heart begins long before the actual heart attack. Symptoms are overlooked initially. For many there are not aware of how stress affects the body until it is too late, similar to the homeowner that realizes the foundation has been eaten away by the termites. In both stories the later the trouble is identified, the more serious the issue and expensive the treatment.

When a hurricane leaves its path of destruction two things must happen for a community to thrive again. The infrastructure, the rebuilding of homes, businesses and transportation routes must be rebuilt. The pace of that effort depends on the size of the disaster and the resources to assist. The 2nd item is the rebuilding of people’s lives. Rebuilding the emotional lives is frequently overlooked and that is one of the reasons why three years after Katrina people are hurricane fatigued. Many people have never recovered from Katrina. The wounds are still fresh. Today, 36 months after Katrina came ashore in Waveland, Mississippi ask a person when Katrina ended and you may get a surprising response, “It hasn’t ended!” So how could Katrina not be over?

Many people have returned to their rebuilt or renovated homes, business is back, so what is the problem and how could something that happened so long ago not be over? The answer is... because for many it is not over. For many they have gone into debt to pay for their new home. Others thought that money they received from the government would not have to be repaid, but for many that money was not in the form of grants but

small business loans. Others fell through the cracks of recovery and never were able to “get it together” from the initial recovery stages. Some of those were people with disabilities, senior citizens, people living alone without a support system, people living paycheck to paycheck to name just a few.

What can be done about hurricane fatigue? People can reduce or eliminate the mental and physical effects of stress that doctors believe are the root cause of 80% of illnesses. The key is...action. Doing something is the key in the face of feeling overwhelmed or whatever the feelings or thought process may be at that moment. We cannot control the severity of the storms coming into the gulf, but we can control our response to the stress that affects us.

It has been said what we think about we become. The mind is a powerful tool that can be utilized to break through old habits that weaken us. By re-learning how to think properly, to focus one’s energy on what can be done instead of what can’t be done goes a long way in the recovery process of letting go of old ways of being and learning new ways to cope with difficult events in our life.

The Survival Kit for the Mind

When I was in the Air Force we taught each pilot to prepare and carry a survival kit in case they had to eject or bail out of an aircraft. It is painfully obvious the government is limited in what it can do in a large scale disaster. It can supply funding to rebuild buildings, the bricks and mortar, however; the bricks and mortar of the mind and body need a different type of discipline. Once the storm and the danger has passed, here are suggestions for rebuilding the inner person during the rebuilding phase and beyond of a natural disaster. The key to this survival kit is to do these activities listed below on a consistent basis until they become a daily part of your life so you no longer just survive, but thrive.

Realization of an inner strength.
Optimism (faith), tell yourself things will get better. Put reminders on 3 x 5 cards and look at the positive sayings throughout the day. Read them aloud.
Be compassionate toward yourself, vital.
Be compassionate toward others by extending your hand in help. Volunteers from all 50 states came to the gulf coast and offered help.
When you feel yourself being overwhelmed, stop what you are doing and breathe deeply and slowly 5-6 times. Do this throughout the day. Each time takes about 1 minute to complete.
Talk to someone and listen to their responses.
Exercise daily. Exercise can take the form of brief exercises at a desk or a walk during lunch, or a more physical activity 3-5 times a week.
A quiet time for introspection. 5-15 minutes sometime during the day to reconnect yourself.

