

News RELEASE

American Psychiatric Association, 1000 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 1825, Arlington, VA 22209

For Information Contact:

Lydia Sermons-Ward, 703-907-8640

lsward@psych.org;

Jessica Mikulski, 703-907-8562

jmikulski@psych.org

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Coping with Storm Related Natural Disasters

Arlington, Va. - As the Atlantic Coast endures its annual hurricane season, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) offers tips on how to minimize possible mental and emotional effects of trauma caused by destruction and loss of life during natural disasters like hurricanes.

“The devastating effects of natural disasters can have tremendous psychological impacts on those affected,” said Anthony T. Ng, M.D., chair of the APA Committee on the Psychiatric Dimensions of Disaster. “Affected individuals may have various stress reactions that present psychological, as well as physical symptoms. However, there are steps that individuals can take for themselves and their families to mitigate and lessen the psychosomatic impacts of a storm related natural disaster.”

While preparing for a storm related natural disaster, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) web site, www.fema.org, suggests:

1. Take precautionary steps to prepare for the disaster by assembling an emergency first aid kit, stocking food and water, securing your home and belongings, making arrangements for pets should you need to leave your home immediately, and following evacuation instructions as they are issued.
2. Listen to the radio or television for weather updates and stay in touch with your family and neighbors concerning evacuation orders. Keep each other updated. A feeling of community can be comforting during a natural disaster.
3. Plan a place for your family to meet in case you are separated during the disaster. Designate a family member or friend outside the area that your family can call to say they are OK.

In general, research shows that the more devastating and terrifying the trauma is the more vulnerable someone is to develop psychiatric symptoms. Aspects of disaster or trauma that increase the likelihood of psychiatric distress include: lack of warning about the event, injury during the trauma, death of a loved one, exposure to horrifying events, experiencing the trauma alone and the possibility of recurrence.

After an event has passed, the APA recommends following these steps to begin coping with the possible devastation and stress that follows such a disaster:

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1. Keep informed about new information and developments, but avoid overexposure to news rebroadcasts of the events. Be sure to use credible information sources to avoid speculation and rumors.
2. Take control of what you can. If possible, stay out of heavily damaged areas that will cause you unnecessary stress and anxiety.
3. If you feel anxious, angry or depressed, you are not alone. Talk to friends, family or colleagues who likely are experiencing the same feelings.
4. If you have contact with children, keep open dialogues with them regarding their fears of danger and the disaster. Let them know that in time, the tragedy will pass. Don't minimize the danger, but talk about your ability to cope with tragedy and get through the ordeal.
5. Feelings of anxiety and depression following a traumatic event are natural. If these symptoms continue, even after order has been restored, or if these feelings begin to overwhelm you, seek the advice of a psychiatric physician in your local community. Or for more information on coping with mental illnesses, visit the American Psychiatric Association's web site at www.psych.org.

The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society, founded in 1844, whose more than 35,000 physician members specialize in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. For more information, visit the APA Web site at www.psych.org.

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