



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Understanding the Effects of Trauma and Traumatic Events to Help Prevent, Mitigate and Foster Recovery for Individuals, Organizations and Communities
A Program of Uniformed Services University, Our Nation's Federal Medical School, Bethesda, Maryland • www.usuhs.mil/csts/

Psychosocial Concerns after Hurricane Katrina Tips for Medical Care Providers

Health care providers assume many roles in the midst of natural disasters: caregiver, leader, comforter, and information source. Hurricane Katrina has displaced thousands, destroyed countless homes and property, and claimed numerous lives. Although the hurricane's strength has dissipated, its aftermath will be felt for considerable time to come. As health care providers mobilize to help, they should be mindful of the losses experienced by the population they will assist. Interviewing with sensitivity is essential, and is the first step in assessing specific needs. This issue of *Courage to Care* provides information for health care providers after hurricanes and pays special attention to some of the issues for individuals providing support in the aftermath of Katrina.

Services and basic needs, such as water, food, power, and sanitation, have been disrupted. Depending on the extent of damage and access to damaged areas, it may be some time before these are restored. The potential for spread of disease and infections underscores need for surveillance and the institution of public health measures. Providers play an integral role in advocating for the restoration of these services as public health necessities.

Those who have otherwise well-controlled medical conditions may not have access to their regular medications. Evacuation and relocation may disrupt medication availability and may contribute to the exacerbations of ongoing mental health and other medical conditions. In addition, persons who routinely use alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs may experience additional difficulties when these are not readily available.

Psychological first aid, an evidenced-informed approach for helping populations cope in the aftermath of a disaster, aims to reduce the emotional and physical responses in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.

Principles include:

- Promotion of safety (help people meet the basic needs for shelter and food, provide a 'recovery environment' to include limited exposure to news and other media related to the disaster, encourage those who are relocated to return only when their areas are deemed safe)
- Promote calm (offer accurate information about the disaster and the efforts underway to help the situation)
- Promote connectedness (help to reunite families and friends, establish a sense of normalcy for children by reinforcing parent-child bond, reuniting children with playmates, and re-establishing, if possible, school and other safe environments)
- Promote self-efficacy (give practical suggestions and referrals that move people to help themselves)
- Promote hope (direct people to services that are available, remind people (if you know) that more assistance will be arriving).

Many of those who have experienced Hurricane Katrina first-hand have lost loved ones, pets, jobs, and property. After such losses, it is not uncommon to experience distress in the form of difficulty sleeping, disbelief, nightmares, feeling sad, and anxiety. In most individuals, these symptoms remit over time and require no formal treatment. A small subset will continue to have difficulties and may present with depression, anxiety, increased arguments with significant others, unexplained medical symptoms, and increased use of cigarettes and alcohol. Should health care providers identify such problems, this may indicate a need for more formalized assessment and intervention.

Providers must be aware of the impact of the disaster on themselves and their professional colleagues. Times of high demand and the desire to "do more" put providers at risk for burn out, fatigue, and reduced effectiveness. Providers are not immune, and should attend to their own needs as well as those around them.