

**Hurricanes Are Very Stressful Events.** All unplanned events that bring uncertain change in our lives, called crises, are always stressful. Hurricanes affect all of us in some way or another. Every member of the family will experience some form of negative response to a hurricane over the next few days and months after it passes.

The signs of post-hurricane trauma are not always immediate; the emotional effects may not appear for months. Recovery time varies as well. Stress takes its toll not only on those hit directly by the hurricane, but also on those who made it through physically untouched by the hurricane. Mental health experts say that those who escaped the hurricane untouched often suffer "survivor's guilt."

People suffering survivor's guilt often push themselves to the limit trying to help. Children, in particular, resent the shattering of their routine. That resentment may manifest itself in enormous guilt, nightmares, temper tantrums and problems at school.

What's important in dealing with trauma after the storm is to understand that there is a natural grieving process -- denial, questioning, acceptance and recovery -- after the loss of normalcy, loved ones, and property.

**Mental Health** A research was done in 2007 to document changes in mental and physical health among 392 low-income parents exposed to Hurricane Katrina and to explore how hurricane-related stressors and loss relate to post-Katrina well being. Briefly the research results indicated: "The prevalence of probable serious mental illness doubled, and nearly half of the respondents exhibited probable PTSD. Higher levels of hurricane-related loss and stressors were generally associated with worse health outcomes, controlling for baseline socio-demographic and health measures."

It is imperative the individuals who experienced loss during a hurricane should take note. Here are a few points to consider.

#### **What Are Some of the Responses After a Hurricane?**

1. Fear, disbelief, suspicion, anger, anxiety, or apathy.
2. Short temper, moodiness and irritability.
3. Reluctance to abandon property.
4. Guilt over having been unable to prevent the disaster.
5. Confusion, numbness, and flashbacks.
6. Difficulty in making decisions.
7. Excessive helpfulness to other disaster victims.
8. Loss of appetite.

9. Crying for no apparent reason.
10. Increased effects from allergies, colds, and flu.
11. Rejecting outside help or feeling disappointed with outside help.
12. Isolation from family, friends, and social activities.
13. Domestic violence.

**How Can Adults Cope?** What Should You Do? We cannot avoid stress, but we can learn to manage it or how to respond to the stressors. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Recognize and accept your feelings -- and realize you're not alone.
2. Talk to others, including family, friends or clergy, about your feelings.
3. Be patient--accept that restoring your life to normalcy will take time.
4. Keep family meals as nourishing and on as much of a routine as possible.
5. Get as much sleep as possible.
6. Relax--a deep breath and vigorous stretch help reduce tension and stress.
7. Whenever possible, do something enjoyable--read a book, watch a video, play games.
8. Walk or jog.
9. Hug your family and friends--affection and touching can be soothing.
10. If your stress symptoms persist, seek professional help

**How Do Children Deal With Stress**, Especially After a Hurricane? Here are some of the signs of stress in children:

1. Head and stomach aches
2. Reluctance to go to bed
3. Insomnia and recurring nightmares sparked by fear that the hurricane will return
4. Regressive behavior such as bed-wetting, thumb-sucking and clinging to parents
5. Fantasies that the hurricane never happened
6. Withdrawal
7. Temper tantrums, crying, and screaming.
8. Shortened attention span, plummeting school performance, or refusal to attend school
9. Loss of appetite
10. Loss of interest in playing
11. Drug and alcohol use by older children

#### **What Can Parents or Adults Do to Help Their Children Cope?**

1. Do not let your children repeatedly watch video or photos on the television about the disaster or traumatic event. This can elevate the stress. Turn off the television when the news of that event comes on. Read more on the next section.
2. Like you, children are scared. Understand their fears--real or imagined--and reassure them they are safe. Extra attention and hugs are important.
3. Allow children to express their feelings in conversations, drawings, or activities. Children sometimes think scary things will go away if they block them out.
4. Share your feelings with your children; let them know their feelings are normal.
5. Answer questions thoughtfully. Take extra time to make sure the explanation is simple and open for discussion.
6. Be patient.
7. Let children know they are not responsible for the disaster. Tell them how being a prepared member of the family helped everyone feel safe.
8. Allow children to help in the cleanup. Children who feel they belong are likely to feel more self-assured.
9. Give extra doses of praise for good behavior.
10. Resume your normal routine as quickly as possible. Provide the same snacks you used to. Make time for family activities such as playing games.
11. Encourage children to help those less fortunate than themselves. Allow them to prepare food, clothing and other items for donations.
12. If your children continue to show stress signs, seek professional help. Your children's stress may be more than you can handle.



**The Media, Children and Traumatic Events** The repeated viewing of violent and horrific TV, Internet and newspaper images of traumatic events can upset them, and negatively affect the way they feel, behave, and perform in school. (*This information is taken from LifeNet NYC for Children*) Here's how children understand disturbing news images:

#### **Ages Six and Younger**

- Believe that what they see on television is happening live; while they are watching it.

- Think that a traumatic event is happening over and over again when they see repeated images of it.
- Find images of people suffering, crying, or being attacked very upsetting.

### Ages Seven to 12

- Understand that the news is only made up of reports about events that have already happened.
- Find disturbing media images upsetting.
- May become anxious for their own and their family's safety.

### Ages 13 and Older

- They can be scared and horrified by the same things as younger children.
- They can become deeply worried and anxious for their own and their family's safety and future.
- They may want to know why the bad things they see on the news are happening.

**Further Steps to Take** Here's are a few steps one can take to help restore emotional well-being and a sense of control in the wake of the hurricane or other traumatic experience. These steps were prepared by the American Psychological Association and I thought can be helpful for us in The Bahamas.

- + Recognize that this is a challenging time but one that you can work to manage. You've tackled hardships at other times in your life. Tap into the skills you used to get through past challenges.
- + Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced. Recognize that you may experience a variety of emotions and their intensity will likely less over time.
- + Take a news break. Watching replays of footage from the hurricane can make your stress even greater. Often, the media tries to interest viewers by presenting worst case scenarios. These may not be representative of your home or community.
- + Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathize with your situation. But keep in mind that your typical support system may be weakened if those who are close to you also have experienced or witnessed the hurricane.
- + Find ways to express yourself when ready. Communicating your experience through talking with family or close friends, keeping a diary, or other forms of self-expression may be a source of comfort. Find out about local support groups led by appropriately trained

and experienced professionals. Support groups are often available in communities following large-scale disasters. People can experience relief and comfort connecting with other hurricane survivors who have had similar reactions and emotions. These can be especially helpful for people with limited personal support systems.

- + Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience difficulties sleeping, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs since these can increase a sense of depression and/or impede you from doing what is necessary to be resilient and cope with events.
- + Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.
- + If possible, avoid major life decisions such as switching jobs because these activities tend to be highly stressful.

### Bible Texts to Encourage and Comfort You:

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| • Psalms 46        | • Psalms 55:22        |
| • Psalms 23        | • 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 |
| • Lamentation 3:32 | • Matthew 6:25-34     |
| • Psalms 103:3-18  | • Philippians 4:6-7   |
| • Psalms 139:9-10  | • I Peter 5:6-7       |
| • Romans 8:18      | • Proverbs 12:25.     |
| • Romans 8:31-39   |                       |



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# Emotional Wellness After a Hurricane

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