

DEALING WITH TRAUMA
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The news from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast following the impact of Hurricane Katrina couldn't be worse. Thousands of people have lost their homes, their possessions, and their loved ones. As a nation, we are stunned, but clearly those who were in the path of the storm have suffered the most severe kind of trauma.

What is trauma? It is the experience of something terrible happening, something that threatens your personal safety or even your life, or the safety or lives of your loved ones. Traumatic events include large-scale natural disasters, like hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes, as well as man-made disasters, like war, plane crashes and industrial accidents.

Trauma can also occur from one-time, individual acts of violence, like bank robbery, assault, and rape; as well as chronic situations like being molested, having cancer or living with AIDS. *People can also be traumatized by simply watching a traumatic event, even if their own safety was not threatened.*

Reacting to trauma: There are three basic stages in a normal reaction to a traumatic event or situation. **First**, there is the initial shock or disbelief – you feel numb, and experience a sense of unreality, like being in a really bad movie. This stage may last a few minutes to a few days.

Next, there is disruption in normal routines and behavior, as you struggle to cope. Life is topsy turvy, nothing makes sense anymore. You may experience many physical as well as emotional symptoms (see below). This stage can last for awhile.

Finally, when the threat is gone and/or you develop sufficient coping mechanisms, you reach a place where you can put the traumatic event or situation into perspective and return to “normal” life. Depending on the severity and duration of the trauma, people may reach this stage within a week or two, or it may take years.

Common symptoms of trauma: Symptoms may include crying, feeling anxiety or anger, feeling detached or in a daze, having a headache or stomachache, restlessness, inability to concentrate, extreme fatigue or exhaustion, fear of being alone, being easily startled, intrusive thoughts or images of the traumatic event, appetite and sleep disturbance.

Typically these reactions are strongest in the first few days following the trauma, and lessen over time. *More severe reactions may lead to a diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which I'll write about next month.*

Coping strategies: The most important thing to remember is that these are all NORMAL reactions to an ABNORMAL event. Think “this too shall pass”, and concentrate on taking care of yourself. Do what you can to increase your sense of personal safety. Talk about what you've experienced with others who understand. Get plenty of rest, spend time with loved ones or favorite activities, and avoid relying on alcohol, drugs or overeating to help you cope. And don't hesitate to seek professional help if you are concerned about your reactions.