

Dealing with the Emotional Impact of the Gulf Disaster

The disbelief and distress we have all been experiencing as a result of witnessing the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast are likely to elicit a host of emotions and concerns. Unfortunately, some in our community have been directly impacted by the destruction created by this disaster. Understandably, it is to be expected that many of us may experience strong feelings, such as helplessness, concern, and fear. Others may find themselves numbed and in shock. At times like these, it is important to remember that different people react and cope in vastly different ways. A person's natural temperament, social support, prior life experiences, coping skills, and the degree of exposure to similar events all combine to trigger that individual's specific reaction. It is important to be aware that, most likely, all of us may, at one point, experience emotional and/or physiological reactions. The acknowledgment of these emotional reactions helps to shorten recovery time and prevent complications.

Possible reactions:

- Distractibility and difficulties with memory and concentration
- Increased reactivity to small issues and events
- Increased moodiness and anxiety
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Increased isolation or irritability
- Decreased energy and motivation
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs

Students, faculty and/or staff whose lives were more directly impacted by the hurricane may also experience other reactions that may include:

Intense emotion and reactivity:

Some people may feel intense anxiety, pain, fear, guilt, shame, grief, horror, anger and shock. They may also have difficulty relaxing or falling asleep. It is not uncommon for people to also become more irritable.

Numbness:

When people are overwhelmed, they may experience shock and protect themselves through detachment, denial or disbelief. They may feel isolated and disconnected from people or even their own normal feelings. In addition, people may feel that their lives are out of balance.

Depression:

Temporarily, some people may have difficulty concentrating or remembering. They may also experience diminished interest in everyday activities and have crying spells. A sense of despair and hopelessness may be evident.

Intrusive recollections:

As we all watch over and over the images emanating from the impacted areas, we may experience distress by the invading thoughts and memories that may follow. Re-experiencing the events by constantly watching TV or other images and news may intensify feelings of sadness and helplessness. Other people may find that they cannot stop thinking about the event or situation which can further exacerbate their feelings of anxiety, pain and grief.

Possible Physical Reactions:

- * Aches and pains, such as headaches, backaches, etc.
- * Heart palpitations, sweating, and chills.
- * Changes in appetite and digestive problems.
- * Increased susceptibility to allergies,
- * Weakness, dizziness, and fatigue most of the time.
- * Changes in sleep patterns.
- * Being easily startled by noises and/or unexpected touch.
- * Increased alcohol consumption and/or

colds, and illnesses.

substance abuse.

How to Better Cope:

Recognize your own feelings. Also understand that your feelings are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

Talk about the experience. Don't push thoughts, emotions and memories of the event away. It is critical to talk about them as often as it is necessary. Talk is healing!

Reach out to friends and family for support. Try to connect with others, especially those who may have shared the same stressful experience. Don't feel embarrassed and/or concerned about a repetitious need to talk to people or to ask for support.

Set small, realistic goals to help tackle obstacles. Take one day at a time.

Keep your life in balance. Balance work with rest.

Acknowledge that you may be operating below your normal level for a while. Structure your time. Schedule breaks for yourself. Redefine your priorities and focus your energy on them.

Get involved in something that is personally meaningful and important everyday.

Monitor your exposure to the coverage of the aftermath

If you are concerned that your response is too intense, or is lasting too long, please seek some help. Appropriate and timely intervention can help a person overcome these difficulties and prevent the development of more serious problems.

Resources for students,

The USD **Counseling Center** (CC) provides free, professional and confidential counseling to USD students. Faculty and staff may also contact the CC **(260-4655)** for consultation on any mental health issue.

Student Health Center (260-4595)
University Ministry (260-4735)

For faculty and staff,

Horizon Health (EAP)
(800) 342-8111
Human Resources
260-4594

Community based mental health professional
(Kaiser, Blue Cross Provider)