

How children cope with the aftermath of a hurricane

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Living through a natural disaster is a traumatic experience for everyone, but especially for children. A new study by University of Miami Psychologist Annette La Greca and her collaborators, indicate that some children who directly experience a devastating hurricane still show signs of posttraumatic stress (PTS) almost two years after the event. The findings suggest that new models for intervention to help children after a natural disaster are needed.

The study, titled "Hurricane-Related Exposure Experiences and Stressors, Other Life Events, and Social Support: Concurrent and Prospective Impact on Children's Persistent Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms," is published online in the [Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology](#) and will be in print in the December 2010 issue.

Previous research mainly has focused on [children](#) during the few months after a major hurricane, or two years or more after the event. Most of the existing post-hurricane interventions are designed for children experiencing PTS two years or more after the storm. The new study "picks up where others left off," assessing children during the in-between period, at nine months (Time One) and then at 21 months after a hurricane (Time Two), explains La Greca, professor of Psychology and Pediatrics in the college of Arts and Sciences at UM and principal investigator of the study.

"There have been no tested interventions developed for children who still show significant symptoms of PTS almost a year after a devastating

hurricane," says La Greca. "What this study shows is that there may be a need to test intervention programs to be used from several months to two years post-disaster, to keep kids from developing persistent stress."

The researchers studied 384 children, in second to fourth grade that lived through Hurricane Charley, a strong category four hurricane that struck Charlotte County, in Southwest Florida in 2004. The storm caused 35 deaths, extensive damage of more than \$16.3 billion and prolonged school closures.

According to the study, 35 percent of the children reported moderate to very severe levels of PTS at Time One, and 29 percent were still reporting these levels of stress at Time Two. Although previous studies have shown that children stress symptoms decline the first year after the hurricane, this study shows that children who are still showing signs of stress towards the end of the first year are likely to persist having symptoms another year later.

"It's more common than not for most children to overcome, on their own, the effects of exposure to a severe hurricane," says Wendy Silverman, professor of Psychology and Director of the Child Anxiety and Phobia Program at FIU.

Florida International University (FIU) and co-author of this study. Our findings that posttraumatic [stress symptoms](#) continued in such a high percentage of children almost two years after Hurricane Charley were somewhat unexpected."

The symptoms the children experience range from reoccurring dreams about the hurricane, to being tense, more distracted, feeling like nobody understands them, more difficulty sleeping, and feeling more sad or fearful than before the disaster. In addition to experiences directly related to the hurricane, other events in the life of a child during the

recovery period, such as parents' separation or an illness in the family, have a "cascading effect" that magnifies the child's difficulties

"Finding that hurricane related [stressors](#) could contribute to other major life events was not necessarily counterintuitive, but, as far as I know, not documented before, and from that perspective, is a significant finding," says Silverman.

Interestingly, social support from peers was found to be very important in helping to protect the child from the psychological impact of the hurricane. "For children that have experienced a destructive hurricane, restoring contact with friends provides a buffer to the negative experiences, helping kids have greater resilience and to adjust better to life after the disaster," says La Greca.

Provided by University of Miami

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