

Children, teens at risk for lasting emotional impact from hurricane sandy

November 7 2012, by Jerry Carey

(Medical Xpress)—After Hurricane Sandy's flood waters have receded and homes demolished by the storm repaired, the unseen aftershocks of the storm may linger for many children who were in the storm's path, particularly those whose families suffered significant losses.

"The lasting emotional impact of a [storm](#) like this can be more devastating than the physical damage the storm caused," says psychologist Esther Deblinger, PhD, the co-director of the Child Abuse Research, Education and Service (CARES) Institute at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-School of Osteopathic Medicine. "Stress, [anxiety and depression](#) can affect anyone who experiences a natural disaster that results in the sudden loss of home or relocation to unfamiliar surroundings. The effect can be especially troubling on [children](#) and adolescents who don't have the same ability as adults to anticipate and cope with trauma."

According to Dr. Deblinger, some children who experienced Hurricane Sandy's destruction will exhibit symptoms – such as withdrawal, depression, sleeplessness and unusually aggressive behavior – that are commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Without help, there is a risk that these symptoms could last a lifetime.

Dr. Deblinger suggests that parents and caregivers help children cope with the stress and anxiety resulting from Hurricane Sandy by:

- Returning to normal routines, if possible, and engaging in rituals such as bedtime stories and [family meals](#) that are comforting for children.
- Minimizing the viewing of television coverage about the storm as the news can provoke anxiety in young people.
- Encouraging optimism about managing the aftermath of the storm and preparing for the future.
- Remembering that, because they are their children's most important role models, it is important for parents and caregivers to take care of themselves and engage in healthy coping strategies.
- Reaching out for professional help if the trauma [stress symptoms](#) exhibited by their children do not subside over time on their own.

"While most children are resilient and will bounce back from the experience, others are going to need help to recover and feel safe again," Dr. Deblinger says. "In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we saw that the children who were most vulnerable to developing anxiety, and even PTSD or depression, had either experienced other significant trauma or emotional difficulties in their past, or had parents who were having difficulty coping with the effects of the storm."

Dr. Deblinger says her recommendation that parents and guardians seek professional help for children whose symptoms do not subside is especially important. "Decades of research have shown that some children, particularly those who have experienced multiple trauma(s), don't eventually 'get over' or 'outgrow' their experiences," she notes. "Left to recover on their own, some children and adolescents may turn to alcohol, drugs and/or other ineffective ways of coping with the distressing feelings and debilitating symptoms associated with PTSD."

Provided by University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey

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