

# Hurricanes' toll on mental health will linger

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Damage from Hurricane Irma in Marco Island, Fla. Photo: Florida National Guard

(HealthDay)—Even after the devastation caused by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma disappears, survivors could still suffer from mental stress

caused by the massive storms, experts say.

"Everybody who has been in a disaster is changed permanently in some way. You never forget it," said Dr. Carol North, a crisis psychiatrist at UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

North has studied thousands of survivors of major disasters, such as the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the Oklahoma City bombings.

"Even though people are permanently changed by going through a disaster, they need not be damaged by their experience," she said in a medical center news release.

Many people experience anxiety, lack of sleep, nightmares or irritability after a traumatic event, but most recover within weeks to months. However, some people may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and take years, or even decades, to recover.

PTSD occurs in about 4 percent of Americans who go through a natural disaster, according to North, but that rate can be as high as one-third among those most affected by the worst [disasters](#).

North outlined some coping techniques for people with short-term symptoms of [mental stress](#) after a disaster. These techniques include:

- Distraction through activities, such as games, music, movies or social events;
- Deep breathing and muscle relaxation exercises;
- Seeking comfort from family, friends and others; and
- Temporary use of medications to ease anxiety and improve sleep.

Dr. James Norcross, a psychiatrist at UT Southwestern Medical Center, said that parents can help children recover after a natural disaster by

remaining calm and reassuring. He also suggested that parents limit children's exposure to news reports on television or social media.

"This can be overwhelming and scary for kids," Norcross said in the news release. "But the good news is that kids are remarkably resilient."

**More information:** Mental Health America has more on [coping with disaster](#).

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