

The impact of Hurricane Harvey on pregnant moms

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University of Houston clinical psychologist Johanna Bick wants to know if online writing can alleviate Hurricane Harvey stress in women who were pregnant during -- or just after -- the natural disaster. Credit: University of Houston

Johanna Bick, assistant professor of clinical psychology at the University of Houston, is launching a study of women who were pregnant during Hurricane Harvey, or who became pregnant within six months after, to track the role of stress in neonatal development and pregnancy outcomes and whether a simple online writing exercise can alleviate some of that anxiety.

"The more we learn about how different women deal with stress in these circumstances and how it affects [birth outcomes](#), the better equipped we'll be to develop prevention and intervention programs."

Bick will study 1,000 Houston moms like Chandra Frederick, who was 29 weeks pregnant and went into false labor when Harvey struck. (Spoiler alert: Her baby Justin was born on time, and she reports he is adorable.)

Three days after the monster storm, Frederick summoned the courage to walk with her three children outside her undamaged home in Spring to assess the neighborhood.

She traipsed up and down the streets, talking to friends, taking in the damage and becoming increasingly anxious.

"As we were walking I started having contractions," said Frederick. "It was less than ten minutes after seeing all this damage, and I think it was completely due to stress."

Frederick may be spot on with her diagnosis. Research indicates excessive exposure to stress hormones in utero may compromise [fetal development](#) and [pregnancy outcomes](#).

"If we can reduce [maternal stress](#), then we can potentially reduce the risk to fetal development," said Bick, whose research project will ask

[pregnant women](#) to participate in a brief, online writing exercise. The women will write about certain experiences for 15 minutes a day for 4 days. Because the goal of the study is to see if the writing will have an effect, some women will not be asked to write at all.

There's no better place to test this simple intervention than in Harris County and Houston, where 72,000 babies will be born in the year following Hurricane Harvey.

Bick will work with Suzanne King, a professor at McGill University in Canada and David M. Olson, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Alberta. King's work includes four other prospective longitudinal studies of children exposed to maternal stress in utero as the result of a natural disaster: The Quebec ice storm of 1998, Iowa floods of 2008 and Queensland floods in Australia in 2011. Olsen works with King on a study of women exposed to the 2016 Alberta wildfires in Canada.

More information: To learn more about the Harvey Mothers's study, or to take part, please go to this website: www.harveymomstudy.com

Provided by University of Houston

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