

Watching too much hurricane news can leave you stricken with stress, study says

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Watching the news to brace for a hurricane is a fact of life for Floridians, but you need to be careful not to stay glued to all those media reports.

Because if you do, you're more likely to succumb to stress and [mental health problems](#) after the [storm](#).

Those are among the findings of a new study released Friday by psychologist-researchers at the University of California, Irvine.

"A steady diet of media while anticipating the disaster is not psychologically helpful," said Roxane Cohen Silver, professor of psychological science and co-author of the study.

The study asked 1,600 Florida residents to [report](#) their hours spent watching media reports in advance of 2017's Hurricane Irma and their anxiety levels in the aftermath. And it found that those who were glued to media reports were likely to suffer more stress and mental health conditions afterward.

The researchers found that Florida residents who paid the most attention to media reports of the storm suffered from "post-traumatic" stress symptoms, regardless of whether the storm spared their homes from damage, Silver said.

In the 60 hours leading up to landfall in the middle Keys on Sept. 10, the

psychologists asked a diverse sample of residents aged 18 to 91 statewide to complete a survey about time spent watching television, listening to radio, reading print news, and scrolling social media.

"We assessed the degree to which people were paying attention to a traditional media as well as online news and social media," Silver said. "People could be doing these at the same time—the radio in the background and checking social media and TV."

They surveyed the same group again, getting a 90 percent response rate in the month after Irma. Those who had paid the most attention to media coverage before the storm, were "repeatedly ruminating or feeling anxious in the aftermath," Silver said.

"It's not about full-blown, post-traumatic stress syndrome that people who go to war might exhibit, but the same kinds of stress. In other work that we have done, we have linked post-traumatic stress to psychological problems over time," said Silver, whose team also studied the lingering effects of repeated exposure to violent images from the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Turning to the media before a storm for information is natural and can be important, but "attention should be tempered," she said.

Communication efforts in Hurricane Irma were hampered because forecasters couldn't narrow which path the storm would take, only that it could be a Category 4 or 5 and would hit Florida.

"The anticipation of this storm and the slow-moving nature, and fact it was hitting one island at a time before it hit Florida, led to this degree of media attention," Silver said. At times, the media coverage "was quite sensationalized," she recalls. "I have a screenshot of a CNN.com headline that said 'In an evacuation zone? Leave now' "

CNN's story on Sept. 8, similar to several media reports, had covered Gov. Rick Scott's early morning press conference, where he said: "If you have been ordered to evacuate, you need to leave now. Do not wait. Evacuate. Not tonight, not in an hour. You need to go right now."

Many heeded the governor's warning, driving out of the state, which left fuel scarce for those who left too late or remained. Of the survey sample of 1,600, nearly a third evacuated, according to a co-author, psychologist Rebecca Thompson.

This is the first report from a planned yearlong study of the data. The psychologists soon will examine the survey results of Florida residents who went through both 2018's Hurricane Michael and 2017's Hurricane Irma.

"People in Florida at risk of [hurricane](#) exposure are experiencing something very different than people at risk for tornadoes or earthquakes," Silver said. "You don't have the kind of lead-up you have with a hurricane."

Silver said what public officials and the [media](#) should take away from the Irma study is that "the period before a hurricane hits is an important one. It's not merely the destruction of homes and communities, but the lead-up to the storm is an important period. ... The focus is always on the aftermath."

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