

How a natural disaster can bring couples closer

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Researchers found that married couples were more satisfied with their relationships after living through Hurricane Harvey. Credit: Gus Holzer and Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission.

Although natural disasters can cause horrific damage to homes and

infrastructure, they can bring married couples closer together, at least temporarily. That's according to a first-of-its-kind study from researchers at The University of Texas at Austin that looked at couples in the Houston area before and after Hurricane Harvey.

The study, published this week in the journal *Psychological Science*, has implications for how best to help families as they navigate different types of stressors.

The research team had already surveyed 231 newly married couples about their relationship satisfaction shortly before Hurricane Harvey hit the Texas coast in August 2017, devastating much of the Houston area. With the advent of the hurricane, researchers saw a unique opportunity to track relationship dynamics through the aftermath of a natural disaster. A relationship study with data from before and after a natural disaster had not been done before.

"We originally set out to study the effects of everyday stressors, such as financial problems and the transition to parenthood, on couples in the early years of their marriage," said Hannah Williamson, assistant professor of human development and family sciences at The University of Texas at Austin and lead author of the study. "When the hurricane hit in the middle of the study, it allowed us to look at the effects of a major acute stressor. Unfortunately, more and more people are going through disasters such as hurricanes and wildfires."

The study found that in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, couples experienced a significant boost in relationship satisfaction. This surprised researchers because in previous studies looking at everyday stressors, couples typically experience "stress spillover" in their relationships, which can decrease their satisfaction with their relationships.

"Based on previous studies, we expected to see people who were happy with their relationships before the hurricane would be even happier afterwards, and people who were unhappy would be more unhappy," said Williamson. "We actually saw the biggest jumps in relationship satisfaction among the couples who were the most unhappy before the hurricane."

The researchers also examined how bad the hurricane experience was for couples, asking them about damage to their homes, financial losses and more. It turns out these differences in experiences did not factor into the results in relationship satisfaction.

None of this means that couples experiencing relationship problems should start planning to spend hurricane season in Florida now. Researchers noted that the boost in relationship satisfaction was not permanent, and couples returned to pre-hurricane levels of satisfaction within a year.

"A natural disaster can really put things in perspective. People realize how important their partner is to them when they are jolted out of the day-to-day stress of life," Williamson said. "There may be therapeutic applications to this if couples can shift their perspective in a similar way without having to go through a natural disaster."

More information: Hannah C. Williamson et al, Experiencing a Natural Disaster Temporarily Boosts Relationship Satisfaction in Newlywed Couples, *Psychological Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/09567976211015677](https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976211015677)

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