

Coping with a Natural Disaster: The Aftermath of Katrina and Rita

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Given our work in the area of resilience my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I have received many questions about the most effective strategies for managing the stress and anxiety triggered by Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita. In response to these questions, we have prepared the following article for our websites.

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On August 29, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of the United States, leaving a trail of destruction that went far beyond what most had expected. Many lives were lost, countless homes and entire communities destroyed, and thousands left homeless. Just three weeks later, Hurricane Rita unleashed its fury on Texas and Louisiana and flooded parts of New Orleans again. Understandably, the scope of such devastation resulted in profound stress especially to those who lost loved ones, homes, jobs, and any semblance of order. Many found temporary refuge in other states (sadly, many people from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast who were sheltered in Houston after Katrina were forced to evacuate again with the approach of Rita). The word “refugee” was used in many news accounts to describe these displaced Americans.

Adding to the distress is that many still do not know if family members and friends are alive or dead. In addition, reportedly at least two police officers in New Orleans committed suicide, while many others resigned or simply abandoned their positions. Despair, frustration, and anger were expressed with intensity, especially after Katrina, both from those who saw their lives shattered as well as from government officials in the towns and cities hit hardest by the wrath of the hurricane who felt that relief was slow to arrive.

Similar to the aftermath of September 11, the mental health of many of those directly affected by the two hurricanes has been especially assaulted. However, given the immediacy of television and the ongoing broadcast of flooded and destroyed homes, the disappearance of entire towns, and the anguished, angry cries of those deprived of the necessities of life, millions of individuals around the globe have felt to some extent the impact of Katrina and Rita.

As we experienced following September 11, we received inquiries from parents and other adults as well as from the media about the most effective ways to manage stress in our children and ourselves and become more resilient when confronted with events such as those that have occurred in the United States during the past month. The psyche of an entire country becomes vulnerable in the face of such natural disasters. Even as people are dealing with the current devastation, it is easy to wonder, “What next? How much more can we take?” One child, not in the path of the hurricanes, wondered if most of the United States could become submerged under water and recommended to his therapist that everyone move to cities located far above sea level.

A heightened level of uncertainty, despair, and disruption is to be expected in the face of events as catastrophic as Katrina and Rita. However, based on our writings in such books as *Raising Resilient Children* and *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, we believe that while we do not possess control over the path and intensity of hurricanes (or other natural disasters), there are strategies that can be adopted that will ease some of the anxiety and uncertainty and fortify what we call a “resilient mindset” in children and adults.

The three ideas that follow are similar to several we have advanced in our website articles pertaining to dealing with disasters that are intentionally triggered by people, such as those engaged in acts of terrorism. Our suggestions for coping with terrorism are also applicable to natural disasters. In describing these suggestions we recognize that for those directly affected by Katrina or Rita, the journey towards recovery and resilience will be long and painful, but it is a journey that is vital for our emotional and physical well-being.

1. Moving from a “why me?” attitude to acceptance and positive action. A basic foundation for resilience is to learn to focus one’s time and energy on those things over which one has influence and control rather than on those events that are beyond our control. It is very natural for individuals who have experienced the horrors of the recent hurricanes to wonder, “Why me?” or “Why my family?” However, while such questions are understandable, especially in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic situation, if they become all-consuming, individuals will be sapped of the energy needed to move beyond

that state of mind and act effectively. Questions such as “why me?” rarely invite a satisfactory answer.

In a poignant interview, Brett Favre, the star quarterback of the Green Bay Packers who has faced his share of personal misfortunes in the past few years (his father died suddenly of a heart attack, his brother-in-law was killed in an accident, his wife was diagnosed with cancer, and his family home on the Gulf Coast was destroyed by Katrina), said that many people experience or have experienced situations similar to his and that it is important not to be distracted by questions of “why me?” He noted that such questions are natural but he is not happy with himself when his mind wanders in that direction since the questions are not helpful in taking constructive action.

A focus on acceptance should not be interpreted as our suggesting that people deny or minimize traumatic occurrences in their lives. A process of mourning is essential, lest feelings be buried only to fester and re-appear. There is no timetable for mourning given all of the variables involved (e.g., the nature of our loss, the degree of disruption in our lives, our mental health status prior to the traumatic event), but a journey from denial and anger towards acceptance is one of the pillars of resilience. With acceptance, one can find ways of coping with the tragedy in order to move forward with one’s life. We really have little, if any, control over the emergence of a natural disaster, but we do have control over developing plans of action to minimize the negative impact of these disasters and even to reflect upon positive outcomes that can emerge from dark moments.

One example of positive thinking and courage in the face of adversity is being demonstrated by Alice Thomas, founder and president of the Center for Development and Learning (CDL) in Covington, Louisiana. By coincidence, I mentioned Alice and CDL in my last website article, which was written prior to Katrina striking the New Orleans area. All members at CDL are safe, but Alice’s home was badly damaged and she and her family are residing for the next few months in Florida. Yet, despite these major disruptions in Alice’s life, she remains focused on enhancing the education of children. Rather than becoming overwhelmed by the enormity of what has occurred to her, her family, and CDL, Alice continues to think about the future and the possible ways that CDL “can deliver important professional development and support services to the schools

and school systems, principals, teachers, and parents affected by the storm.” For more information about CDL’s efforts please visit their website at <http://www.cdl.org>.

2. Maintain connections as a basis for comfort and strength. In times of need, it is critical that people experience connectedness. Typically other people provide the most powerful source of connections. However, as is evident in Alice Thomas’ vision to develop an effective school system in the New Orleans area, connections may also be manifested in other forms including to ideas, to causes, to particular communities and institutions, and to one’s religion. Connections were significantly disrupted for those in the path of Katrina. Many lost loved ones or could not locate them for days. Some are still searching. Homes, schools, banks, supermarkets, houses of worship were decimated. Instruments of communication that we take for granted such as televisions, radios, computers, phones, and cell phones were inoperable, separating people from friends and relatives. There were numerous accounts of people trapped in attics for days without any manner of communicating with the outside world.

Connections are a source of comfort and hope. It is especially important for parents to be available to their children. Given all of the media coverage and stories, even young children who do not live in the vicinity of the Gulf Coast and Texas are aware of the wrath of Katrina and Rita. Photos of missing children and entire neighborhoods that were leveled or submerged under water appear with regularity on our television shows. Parents should not hesitate to initiate a discussion with children about Katrina and Rita. Most children have questions and will welcome the opportunity to voice their concerns and anxieties if invited to do so in an empathic manner. If your children appear not to wish to talk about these events, don’t pressure them to do so but instead let them know you are available to discuss any questions they have.

In any dialogue, attempt to understand your children’s perception of what has occurred. Obviously, their perception and your response will vary from one child to the next and will depend in great part on the age of the child and his or her cognitive level. Very young children will be more prone to relate the events to their immediate world such as worries of what would happen if a hurricane or other natural disaster struck their neighborhood, where would they stay if their home was destroyed, and who would take care of them should something happen to their parents.

However, even older children (and adults) are not immune from a heightened feeling of anxiety manifested in various forms such as distractibility, problems sleeping, neediness, or irritability. It was not surprising to read a news report of increased mental health needs of people in the aftermath of Katrina or to hear a recent TV news story detailing an increase in sales of “survival kits” throughout the country.

When speaking with children we must be realistically reassuring. As you understand the nature of your children’s concerns, be empathic and validating. Don’t minimize or dismiss their feelings by saying, “We’re fine, there’s nothing to worry about.” Instead validate what they have expressed. Share your own feelings of sadness or worry or anger but do so in a way in which your children don’t feel that you are falling apart since that will only serve to contribute to their sense of insecurity. You can let your children know that what happened is sad and that it does make people more worried. However, you can add that people are doing all they can to make certain we are safe and highlight the goodness and kindness of others. You can point to concrete actions such as the presence of the National Guard and other people to help clean up and rebuild homes and businesses that were destroyed. As you talk, pay close attention to your children’s questions to guide you in terms of how much to say and how to say it.

Being available to our children is not limited to discussions of situations such as occasioned by Katrina and Rita. At all times but especially during periods of stress, we need to be more present in the lives of our children—to play with them, to read to them, to attend their games, to watch TV with them, and with our young children to tuck them in at night. They need to feel that we love them and are there for them.

Adult family members must also do the same for each other. Speaking with our spouse, our friends, our relatives about our anxieties can lessen our worries. Just as we do not want our children to be alone with their worries, we must ensure that we do not isolate ourselves from others.

3. Provide your children and yourself with opportunities to help others. As many of you are aware, we have lectured and written extensively on the importance of individuals of all ages contributing to the well-being of others. We have emphasized our belief that there is an inborn need in children to want to help and when they do so it reinforces compassion, responsibility, and resilience. As noted above, while we did not

have control over the occurrence of the natural disaster, we do have a say in our response to this disaster, which can include acts of kindness.

We have discovered that at all ages these acts of kindness reinforce the belief that we are making a difference, often easing some of our anxiety as we experience a sense of control and mastery. Adults should involve children in charitable activities such as helping to collect food and clothing for those displaced by the hurricanes or offering even a small amount of money. There was an account of one young child who asked those attending his birthday party to make a donation to the Red Cross rather than give him a present; when this child was interviewed he voiced happiness at being able to do something for those affected by the hurricanes. While we should not use these charitable acts as a way of avoiding or ignoring a child's sadness, we can use them in conjunction with easing the pain and stress that many youngsters are experiencing. We should also note that when the entire family is involved in a charitable activity, it serves to strengthen the bonds of that family.

There are many uncertainties that numerous families and entire communities will face in the weeks, months, and even years ahead. We believe that as parents, teachers, and other caregivers we must fortify our own support systems so that we will be better equipped to assist children to deal more successfully with their struggles and anxieties. Our ability to be available and accessible, to be realistically reassuring, and to find avenues through which our we and children can feel more in control, especially by contributing to others, will establish a foundation for resilience for all of us.

In ending, it is reassuring to consider the words of Dr. George Bonanno, a psychologist who has studied resilience in New Yorkers exposed to the terror of September 11, 2001. In an article in *The Boston Globe* written by Carey Goldberg last month, Bonanno emphasized, "We used to think of resilience as a rare phenomenon. But the evidence seems to show that resilience is quite common—it's an ordinary phenomenon, it's not extraordinary."