

COLLEGE STUDENTS COPING AFTER THE HURRICANE

The recent hurricane has been an extremely devastating event, and the days, weeks, and months following can be very stressful. How long it will take to recover depends a lot on what happened to you, your family, and your community. In the aftermath, it's often difficult to figure out where to begin. You may need to know if what you're experiencing is a common reaction to these types of events or you may want to know how you can get involved in the recovery process. Either way there are things to consider before moving forward.

It could help to begin by taking stock of your own situation, especially in terms of what your most immediate needs are. Some of you may have had personal traumatic experiences, suffered serious injury, or the loss of loved ones, a home, and/or possessions. Some of you may have been stuck on or near campus without power, food, and water. It may have been difficult to get in touch with family members or to get to campus to check on friends. There may be increased financial difficulty and disruption of daily routines (such as class being postponed or cancelled). These types of experiences and changes can pose a psychological challenge to the recovery of young adults and families in the affected areas. The good news is that soon, most of you will return to normal routines. We also know that for some this will be more of a struggle.

What you could be experiencing:

- **Posttraumatic Stress Reactions** – are common, understandable, and expectable. But are nevertheless serious in the fact that they can begin to interfere with your daily functioning and impede your recovery process. There are three types of Posttraumatic Stress Reactions:
 1. Intrusive Reactions are ways the traumatic experience comes back to mind. This includes recurrent upsetting dreams, thoughts or images, and strong emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the hurricane;
 2. Avoidance and Withdrawal Reactions include avoiding people, places and things that are reminders of the hurricane; feeling emotionally numb, detached or estranged from others; and losing interest in usual pleasurable activities; and
 3. Physical Arousal Reactions include sleep difficulties, poor attention and concentration, irritability, jumpiness, nervousness, and being on the lookout for danger.
- **Grief Reactions** – are normal, vary from person to person, and can last for many years. There is no single “correct” way of grieving for loved ones that have died, including for our pets. Personal, family, religious, and cultural factors affect the experience of grief and its meaning. Over time, your grief reactions will include more positive reminiscing or you will find positive ways to memorialize or remember a loved one. Be patient with yourself and your family during this difficult time.
- **Traumatic Grief** – is when you who have suffered the traumatic loss of a loved one and you find it difficult to grieve. This may be due to you focusing on the circumstances of the death, how the loss could have been prevented, what the last moments were like, and issues of accountability.

- **Depression** – can include depressed or irritable mood, change in sleep or appetite, decreased interest in activities, fatigue, and feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness. It is typically associated with unwanted changes, prolonged grief, loss, and strongly related to the accumulation of post-disaster adversities and the frustrations that accompany them. Some youth and adults may experience suicidal thoughts, which is a significant issue that should be taken seriously to prevent self-harming behavior. If you are experiencing these kinds of thoughts and feelings it is important to get help immediately. Reach out to your family or call SAMHSA’s National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
- **Physical Symptoms** – can occur, even in the absence of any underlying physical injury or illness. These symptoms include headaches, stomachaches, rapid heartbeat, tightness in the chest, change in appetite, and digestive problems.
- **Trauma and Loss Reminders** – are things, events, situations, places, sensations, and even people that remind you about a traumatic event or loss. *Trauma Reminders*: You may continue to encounter places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and inner feelings that remind you of the hurricane. The sounds of rain falling, the smell of gas, being cold or in the dark, and feeling strong wind may become powerful reminders. Adults and youth are often not aware that they are responding to a reminder, and the reason for their change in mood or behavior may go unrecognized. *Loss Reminders*: Those of you who have lost loved ones may continue to encounter situations and circumstances that remind you of the absence of your loved one. These reminders can bring on feelings of sadness, emptiness in your life, and missing or longing for the loved one’s presence.

Contending with ongoing stresses and adversities can significantly deplete your ability to adaptively cope and, in turn, interfere with recovery. For example, you and some of your friends may increase your use of substances, experience changes in expectations for the future, show signs of irritability, or be less motivated. Intrusive images and reactivity to reminders can seriously interfere with school and work performance, and avoidance of reminders can lead to not participating in important activities, relationships, interests and plans for the future.

There are several ways to enhance coping with the types of reactions you may be experiencing.

Physical	Stress can be reduced with proper nutrition, exercise and sleep. Remember, you may need to take care of yourself physically to be of help to loved ones, friends, and your community.
Emotional	Remember, your emotional reactions are expectable and will decrease over time. However, if your reactions are too extreme or do not diminish after 6 weeks, there are professionals who can be of help.
Social	Communication with, and support from your family members, friends, professors, resident advisors, and/or co-workers can be very helpful in coping after catastrophic events. Remember to communicate with others, and to seek and use this support where available.

What you can do for yourself

- Identify and talk about your safety concerns with a trusted friend, family member, professor, resident advisor, or counselor.*
- Avoid watching too much news about the hurricane or the recovery efforts. Although you may understandably want to know “the facts,” the repetitious recycling on “the news” may make you feel worse about the future and leave you more worried, angry, or depressed.*
- Keep to your healthy routine as much as possible (get enough sleep, eat and exercise regularly, and drink plenty of water).*
- Spend time with family and friends. Don’t cut yourself off from loved ones.*
- Focus on slowing down your breathing as you inhale and exhale when you become upset. Also, practice using slow breaths before bedtime to improve sleep.*
- Do stretches or learn yoga.*
- Listen to soothing music.*
- Daydream. Imagine things that calm you. Picture people or places that have brought you joy.*
- Write in a journal.*
- Do activities and things with others that make you happy or that calms you.*
- Pay attention to your thoughts. When you find you are thinking about things that make you upset, nervous or angry, notice them and stop or change them. You can distract yourself by changing activities.*
- Get involved. Join student groups who are helping with the clean-up or response.*
- Give yourself more frequent study breaks if you’re having problems studying.*
- See what support activities the campus counseling office is offering.*
- Find ways to reach out to your peers who may be impacted. If you see a friend is struggling, notify the counseling office or a trusted adult.*
- Learn more about the school’s emergency plan if you’re concerned about safety on campus.*

In the aftermath of the hurricane, you or your family may be facing difficulties, or you may know others—friends, neighbors, extended family, co-workers, professors—who are having difficulties. With so many people facing the challenges of recovery, no one needs to experience them alone. We all can reach out to one another—to give support or to get support. Surround yourself with people you trust, talk through what you are feeling, stay involved with others, and don’t expect too much from yourself or others under such difficult circumstances. You will find that you and your support network have what it takes to make it through these challenging times.