

# Psychological Storm Surges- managing emotional damage from natural disasters

**By: Dwight Bain, Nationally Certified Counselor**

Consider that everyone has a capacity for stress, (*think of it like a balloon inside*), and that every major change builds up more internal pressure. So how long can an average person go without "popping" emotionally after a natural disaster like a hurricane, especially a massive storm like Hurricane Frances? Or what about a person who is more fragile and susceptible to traumatic stress like an elderly adult or a young child?

It is likely that we are going to see people experiencing an unusual kind of emotional condition after the recent killer hurricanes in Florida that I call "*Psychological Storm Surge*." This is an emotional reaction that is in some ways similar to the actual storm surge that occurs when a hurricane makes landfall and slams into the coastline with a wall of cold sea water, sometimes up to twenty feet tall.

## ***Two types of Damaging Storm Surge***

The difference between the two types of storm surge is significant because the damage to life and property when the actual tidal wave of water hits is often the biggest cause of death and destruction from a hurricane. However, much of the damage from a psychological storm surge happens ahead of a storm like this one, because it's the growing stress, panic and anxiety of the unknown. People have a normal need to feel in control of their surroundings and monster storms, like hurricanes or tornados take away all elements of control. You lose control of just about everything in a major disaster like this one. Like the loss of feeling secure in your own home. Stable from knowing that you have many choices and places to find basic necessities like gasoline, water or ice without waiting for hours. Safe playing with your children on the beaches or recreation areas that Florida is famous for. Strength in believing that your world is as balanced as it can be, with the hope that things could only get better.

Psychological storm surges from storms like this one bring most of their damaging stress ahead of time, then at a heightened level for as long as the crisis event lasts. Hurricane Frances has given this country something that we have never experienced before- a disaster that actually has grown smaller in physical size and destructive power, while growing ever larger in our minds. There's where the stress is building to crisis proportions and that's why the pressure will continue to grow long after this hurricane has moved on.

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### **Psychological Storm Surge-**

*The rapid build up of emotional pressure associated with impending danger from a natural disaster. Peaks when the actual impact of the storm is realized, and then gradually diminishes over the course of the recovery and rebuilding time in returning to normal daily activities. This condition is worsened if there are multiple disasters or losses to deal with, for example, consider the stress and pressure that people who had loved ones as passengers on the high-jacked airliners that were crashed into the World Trade Center or loved ones already at work inside the buildings on the morning of 9/11/01. They had to deal with a massive personal relationship loss on top of a catastrophic national disaster. This condition is usually temporary, although the traumatic stress related damage can last for months to years longer. ~ Dwight Bain, Crisis Counselor*

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### ***Emotional hurricanes spin questions and confusion***

In over twenty years as a crisis counselor I've never experienced a disaster quite like Hurricane Frances because it put millions of people into an emotional state of crisis reaction over 4-5 days before the storm hit, and then for days afterwards. This left people and their concerned family members around the country in a continual state of limbo and emotional confusion about what to expect next. Picture it as sort of a swirling hurricane of emotions inside, with continual questions spinning through people's minds before the storm, during it and then after the storm passes. Questions like-

- **What answers can I tell my kids when I don't have any myself?**
- **How much longer will this go on?**
- **Are the dangerous winds coming yet and what about tornadoes?**
- **Will it ever get here and when will this ever end?**
- **What will happen to me- what will happen to my family?**
- **Can I even afford to pay for all this survival stuff?**
- **How long can I miss work and still keep my job?**
- **What about school and work schedules next week?**
- **How long will we be without electricity again?**
- **How can I help others in my family when I can't even help myself?**
- **Do we have enough food, water and ice to make it?**
- **Where will we get groceries now that so many stores are damaged?**
- **When will there be more generators and the gasoline to run them?**
- **Will my home and possessions survive the storm?**
- **How can I protect my home from looters without a phone to call 911?**
- **How much longer can I hold on?**
- **Dear God, help us because we can't take much more!**

### ***Killer Storms waiting in the Shadows***

Some people described it like a killer lurking in the shadows that you know is there, but won't come out. It just stays there, watching and waiting for you to drop your guard so that it can strike when you are the weakest. So you get your defenses ready, you flex your muscles, you tense up and brace for the fight; and then when the fight doesn't come you have a bigger fight to deal with—the fight inside your own head and heart. Your head says to stand your ground and to be firmly focused on the facts of the situation; while your heart considers the feelings inside yourself and the loved ones around you. Feelings like fear, stress, doubt, sadness, anger, confusion, depression, anxiety, panic and the helplessness of being in such an out of control situation.

When you have a prolonged wait in the readiness mode of facing a crisis head-on but then have to keep waiting, the challenge changes from the enemy on the outside to the enemy within. You have to deal with your own challenges of managing resources, energy, time, and emotional strength to just handle the pressure and realities of daily life. When you can face your own challenges and take control of your own emotions you have solved one of the enemies that drain your ability to cope with a crisis. This allows you to protect your supplies of energy to have the stamina to hold on to face the monster that is coming because you still fear that if you let up for even a minute, the monster will destroy you.

### ***The Multiplier Effect of Storm Stress***

While these feelings are normal for everyone trapped in a disaster situation like this one, they are multiplied by the number of relational connections that you have tied to the crisis event. For instance, if you see a news story of flooding in the Midwest where homes and businesses are destroyed, you don't react much. You don't know those people or what they experienced when they went back to their homes to find everything they owned ruined by rain and mud. You can't imagine the powerlessness they feel from not even knowing where to start in cleaning up. It's just a news story to you and that's okay. However, if you change that situation to a flood in the small town your parents live in, the same town where you grew up, and everything takes on a life or death level of urgency. That's normal. You only get emotionally involved in the stories that are connected to your life; otherwise you might stay so overwhelmed with the needs of those living in third world countries that you would never have enough emotional energy to deal with your own life.

Stress is dramatically multiplied when your loved ones are involved in the crisis event along with you. A concerned mother has enough stress to deal with, like being scared about the big oak trees around her home; having enough baby food and bottled water on hand to last for days; and getting back to work and school next week. Then you add the sometimes impossible task of keeping her children

safe and secure in a prolonged situation that doesn't allow for travel outside of the home and you have doubled the stress on the caregiver of that child. But the multiplier effect of psychological storm surge doesn't stop there. You factor in every relationship that she might be feeling distressed over.

For instance, a woman might be worried about her fire-fighter husband - who is on duty protecting the public during the storm, her three young children at home and her elderly parents, who evacuated to a hotel in Savannah. This woman is feeling the stress of seven, because you consider the emotional and psychological pressure on herself and the six others that she is strongly connected to.

### ***Emotional Explosions Growing Stronger***

When you begin to consider the pressures on people in Florida who waited days for Frances to arrive and then felt trapped in their homes by curfews and forced evacuations while she slowly crossed the state; it is no wonder that people are already experiencing emotional explosions. You probably have seen people shouting at each other in public places like never before, or getting suddenly sick with severe colds or flu, or curling up and feeling like a zombie, or feeling completely and totally exhausted with so much to do, but no energy to do it, or over spending on supplies that aren't reasonable to the situation, *(like the people who bought chainsaws and don't even have any trees)*, These emotional reactions will continue and likely get worse over the next few weeks until the effects of the Psychological Storm Surge subsides.

The warning signs of emotional distress following a natural disaster like this one are in four areas of life. Physical, Emotional, Behavioral and Cognitive. The presence of these symptoms in yourself, or in a loved one or coworker indicates that the internal pressure has built up to an overwhelming level. When you see many symptoms in these four areas, it is wise to seek professional help from a qualified medical or psychological practitioner to prevent things getting worse.

## **STORM STRESS RESPONSES**

### **Physical**

Fatigue	Sweating	Shortness of breath	Loss or increase of appetite	Nausea or Diarrhea
Elevated blood pressure	Tightness in chest or chest pain	Muscle fatigue or weakness	Insomnia or Hypersomnia	Increased cold or flu symptoms
Pacing	Heart Palpitations	Shallow breathing	Fainting	Abdominal pain

**Emotional**

Anger	Stress	Anxiety	Tension	Apathy
Fear	Panic	Guilt	Uneasiness	Alarm
Numb inside	Impatience	Depression	Shame	Nervousness

**Behavioral**

Restlessness	Impulsive	Avoidance	Edgy	Rapid speech
Tense muscles/neck	Easily startled or jumpy	Hyper-vigilance	Withdrawal from others	Accident proneness

**Cognitive**

Easily Distracted	Poor concentration	Forgetfulness	Errors in judgment	Mental Fog
Decreased decision making	Reduced creativity or mental focus	Diminished productivity	Loss of objectivity	Self-consciousness
Confusion	Fear of losing control	Frightening visual images	Fear of injury, death, pain	Flashbacks-nightmares

Remember that these symptoms can occur in a young child or elderly adult, and that you have to be more aware of their symptoms since they may not be able to tell you exactly how they feel. The more symptoms you see, the greater the possibility for damaging stress to harm you, or someone you love. Take action to talk to the person in need and offer to sit down with them to review the issues and seek treatment options, which begins just by talking about how the storm impacted them. Just talking will release a great deal of pressure and may be all that the person needs to refocus on the task at hand. However, if the symptoms continue, or worsen or the person takes on more of a “zombie” like flat facial expression, seek medical care immediately since this may indicate a more serious physical condition.

While we won't ever know just how desperate some people felt because of the damaging effects of stress after Hurricane Frances, we do know that the psychological stress impacted millions of people. When we were finally able to stop holding our breath about what might happen it allowed us to exhale and think about picking up the debris after this killer storm marches past.

***Stages of Storm Stress- moving from Panic to finding Peace again***

Here are the nine stages of storm stress which will be discussed in greater detail in an upcoming article. Identify which stage you are on to best determine what to do next as you rebuild your personal and professional life.

**Disaster Phase:**

Storm level

Safety level

Survival level

**Recovery Phase:**

Stressed level

Support level

Structure level

**Rebuilding Phase:**

Stability level

Security level

Strength level

**About the author:**

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