

Coping:

When Loved Ones Have Been Directly Affected by Hurricane Katrina

UCB faculty, staff and students with family and friends directly affected by Hurricane Katrina may have individual reactions and concerns in the aftermath of this disaster. This personal experience is based on many factors, including previous trauma exposure, personal and financial resources, social support, closeness to one's family and friends, and ongoing developments for loved ones.

Common Normal Reactions and Concerns

Some common reactions and concerns experienced by members of our campus community with loved ones affected by Hurricane Katrina **may** include, but are not limited to:

1. Difficulty locating missing family and friends and concern for their safety
2. Difficulty reaching and communicating with family and friends when they are located
3. Grief and upset regarding the displacement/dispersion of relatives, friends, community to places throughout US, including children separated from their parents and lost family pets
4. Concern for elderly relatives that have been evacuated from assisted living situations
5. Sadness, grief and/or anger over loved ones who have died from the hurricane or its aftermath
6. Questions and decisions about how to help and how much one can help loved ones
7. Concern about the uncertain future for surviving family members (finances, jobs, health, school, rebuilding, relocating, eldercare)
8. Fatigue from efforts to locate family members and consider their needs
9. Grief over the loss and destruction of familiar neighborhoods, landmarks and hangouts; loss of cherished possessions, as well as one's community cultural and archival heritage
10. Concern about the future and viability of one's city, community, region, and state
11. Questions and feelings about federal, state and local response, including race and class issues
12. Initial feelings of relief over not being there for the disaster, and feeling guilty about such feelings
13. Guilt over being far away in better circumstances and having escaped the direct effects, as well as the wish to escape the realities of what is happening and its personal impact on you and yours
14. Guilt and/or sadness over difficult and/or disconnected relationships with family or friends who are hurricane victims. Uncertainty about whether and how to communicate with them
15. Conflict over having a different perspective on the tragedy than what is being shown in the media or is being experienced by others who are being directly or indirectly affected
16. Isolation from others who you think do not understand what you are going through

In addition, individuals may go through periods of being in shock or numb, being unable to cry, express emotion, or vent anger; or they may be having strong feelings including frustration, sadness, anxiety and/or anger that can at times feel "out of control." They may experience unexpected bouts of crying, difficulty sleeping, bad dreams, loss of appetite, and increased irritability and fatigue.

There can be an inability to concentrate and keep up with academic and work deadlines, because they are distracted by concern for their loved ones, or overloaded by questions and emotions from concerned coworkers, students or colleagues. The hurricane disaster may leave individuals feeling overwhelmed and powerless, or re-awaken feelings and reactions from previously experienced losses and traumas (including symptoms of flashbacks, disturbing memories and images).

Finding Ways to Cope

Acknowledge your emotions. What you are going through is significant, complicated, draining and emotional even if you were not in the “eye of the storm.” You are not “going crazy” but having normal and understandable reactions to what is going on with your loved ones. You may have good days and bad days but over time you will “level off” and feel more normal.

Be aware of “survivor guilt.” Realize that “survivor guilt” is a common though irrational reaction when those we care about have been hurt and injured through no fault of our own. It is not your fault that your loved ones were devastated and it would not have made a difference in the impact of Katrina if you were there when it happened.

Get workplace and academic assistance. Ask for help and accommodation in your workplace or academic location if needed. Check with those in leadership positions on policy, benefit and leave concerns, course requirements and deadlines, etc.

Spend time with others. Avoid the normal reaction to withdraw and isolate at times like these. Talk about your feelings and concerns with trusted family, friends, colleagues, etc., as well as join them for normal, everyday activities. When needed, also give yourself “alone time.”

Be resourceful. Use campus and outside resources to help sort out feelings, problems and concerns. It is often better to have the perspectives of others who are trained to help. Connect with others who share your experience.

Take care of your physical health. Get to bed as early as you can, eat well even if you do not have much of an appetite, keep up your exercise, deep breathing and other relaxation routines. Just taking a walk can help. Limit or avoid use of alcohol, caffeine, nicotine and other substances. If you have persistent problems with sleeping or stomach upset, check with your doctor for help.

Reduce other stress in your life. Simplify your life as much as possible right now and avoid making any big decisions or life changes until you have more distance from the initial crisis. You may need to take a break and get away for a day or two for some quiet time.

Keep things in perspective and acknowledge what you can and cannot control. Do not give up hope. It will take a long time to sort things out and address the needs of your loved ones. Remember how resilient people tend to be in coping with disaster. Realize there are limits to what you can do now and in the future. Life goes on and it is expected that you will have to attend to the needs of your daily work, as well as your personal life.

Write things down. It can be helpful to keep a journal of what you are experiencing on a daily basis or to find other ways of expressing what you are going through arts, crafts and music, etc.

When to Seek Professional Help

It is normal to have many varied and uncomfortable reactions to events like Katrina. In time, we hope to start to feel “more normal” and better able to cope. However, sometimes social withdrawal and/or intense feelings persist that affect our personal, academic and work functioning over an extended period of time and start to damage our relationships with others. If that happens, it is very important to get professional help and not to be ashamed or embarrassed to ask for assistance. You can access professional help through confidential resources off campus or UHS counseling resources such as **Counseling and Psychological Services for students at 642-9494 and CARE Services for Faculty and Staff at 643-7754. CARE Services also offers assistance with elder care needs.**