



Disasters May Be Causing 'Compassion Fatigue'

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By Star Lawrence

WebMD

As Hurricane Rita bears down on Texas, the horrific images and stories from Hurricane Katrina are still fresh in our minds: desperate people unable to evacuate, pets left for dead, families split up and dispersed all over the country, jobs gone, homes destroyed. And it didn't help that initial relief efforts were disorganized and slow.

It's little wonder that many Americans well outside the hurricane zones are experiencing signs of depression and what some experts call "compassion fatigue." And it may not be over yet.

[Are You Prepared if a Hurricane Strikes Your Area?](#)

Causes of Compassion Fatigue

One aspect of compassion fatigue is identification. You can see yourself in the same situation as the victims.

"Depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome are serious psychiatric illnesses," explains Michael Addis, PhD, associate professor of psychology at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., and author of *Overcoming Depression One Step at a Time: A Guide to Medication-Free Recovery*.

"Some of the reactions to the hurricanes may have similar symptoms, but I consider these reactions to be within the normal range of reactions to disasters of this magnitude."

In other words, you are not outside the box on what you are feeling.

"Katrina overran us with no warning," explains Beverly Smallwood, PhD, a psychologist in private practice at the Hope Center in Hattiesburg, Miss. "The effects blossomed out all over the country."

People have a deep-seated fear of losing everything, says Smallwood, who is involved in the recovery in Mississippi. “It’s like the fear of death. You can’t think about it all the time or you couldn’t go on, but with Katrina it was raised.”

“Some disasters just enter the national psyche,” agrees [Dana E. Lightman, PhD, author of Power Optimism: Enjoy the Life You Have](#). “These are things you just cannot believe at first.”

[How to Survive the Emotional Trauma of a Storm](#)

Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

Some people report sleeping poorly in the month since Katrina. Or awakening with the nagging feeling that something bad happened and taking a second to identify what it was.

Smallwood identifies some other reactions:

- You may feel odd or different all day.
- You may withdraw or feel numb or blah, which is actually a protective device.
- You may experience nightmares of being powerless or stumbling through a destroyed landscape.
- You may get headaches.
- You may cry more easily.

[A Firsthand Account of Disaster Relief from Emergency Shelters](#)

TV or No TV?

Addis says the tireless coverage of Katrina has amplified reactions. And something more may be involved: the loss – for now — of a city that was identified in the minds of many Americans with fun, freedom, and having a good time. People may be mourning the death of fun.

“Media coverage can have both a positive and negative effect,” Smallwood says. “Or maybe either/or.” For some people, watching the coverage results in tunnel vision — all they can see around them is tragedy and destruction. If you had a trauma in your past, this may spring to the fore again. Be ready for it. For others, though, the coverage spurs them to action.

“You have to take your own emotional temperature,” Addis says. “It is easy to miss how you feel; most people are not good at this.”

“I am on the East Coast,” **Lightman** says. “We had a terrible summer weather-wise, but during the Katrina tragedy, the weather was nice. I could see people thinking, ‘Do I have permission to enjoy myself?’”

[Katrina's Evacuees: Facing Life Far From Home](#)

Positive Action

Lightman says you have a duty to replenish yourself. You need to be in this for the distance.

“Say to yourself, ‘Let me take in this energy so I can help,’” she says. This is not about ignoring the situation, she adds, or losing track, but you can be positive and give that as a gift to someone who needs it.

Some other suggestions for positive action:

Turn off the TV sometimes and go into your “influence zone” — the mind-set in which you do something or change something. This can mean investigating a charity and then contributing, adopting a lost animal, sending gift cards to shelters, volunteering your time or spare living space, donating clothes, maintaining a database or web site, offering lab space to displaced scientists, or getting kids in school.

“Many people would have been helped by having a bank account,” **Lightman** notes. “If you are a banker, how can you make this happen in the future?”

Take care of yourself — eat nutritious food, exercise, and go to bed on time. Pray, meditate, or even get a massage. Continue your routines, connect with friends and family, and value what you have.

Express your feelings. “It’s not just the events,” Smallwood says, “but how you feel about the events [that creates the reactions].” Write. Even if you don’t keep a journal regularly, start now. Many studies show that writing can help put feelings in perspective.

Remember the three C’s, urges Smallwood: commitment, control, and challenge. When you watch TV, look for people showing those qualities. “I always look for the positive,” she says.

Remember that you are not alone in these feelings.

People are social animals. That’s why when many people they never met are hurting, they hurt along with them.

This is really a good thing. Your job is not to let compassion overwhelm you.

[What You Can Do to Help Katrina's Survivors](#)

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*SOURCES: Michael Addis, PhD, associate professor of psychology, Clark University, Worcester, Mass.; author, *Overcoming Depression One Step at a Time: A Guide to Medication-Free Recovery*. Beverly Smallwood, PhD, psychologist in private practice, Hope Center, Hattiesburg, Miss. Dana Lightman, PhD, author, *Power Optimism: Enjoy the Life You Have*.*