

Surviving Storm Stress- *Dealing with the psychological trauma of natural disasters*

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Hurricanes can be deadly. That's why emergency weather management facilities send out such serious warnings days ahead of time to protect the lives of our children, homes and communities. We know to stay inside during severe weather and to unplug our televisions and computers during thunderstorms because we know that in bad weather bad things can happen. We know to prepare ahead of time by keeping a watchful eye on tracking the hurricane and stocking up on the resources needed to get through the storm, like flashlight batteries, bottled water, first aid kits and other essential survival supplies. What we usually don't know is how to deal with the devastating emotions that come after a terrible storm hits. Emotions like stress, anger, worry, depression, anxiety and panic are common in our busy lives, but can build up to dangerous levels after a critical incident, which often can lead to disastrous results.

Natural disasters can destroy entire communities in just a few moments, while the recovery process to rebuild from a major critical incident may take weeks or months to sort through. The more you know about how to survive after the storm, the faster you can take positive action to get your personal and professional life back on track. Since hurricanes are among the biggest and most destructive natural disasters to impact people in the United States; what can you do right now to cope with the psychological impact of a major storm before or after it makes landfall?

The most important thing to focus on is this:
“DON'T MAKE A BAD SITUATION WORSE!”

Keep this single thought in mind as you begin to sort through the process of stabilizing yourself and those you care about who have been impacted by the storm. During the storm the goal is to be safe while surviving the gale force winds and rain. After the hurricane passes, the goal is to quickly rebuild the normal life routines that you had in your personal and professional life before the storm. If you get focused on rebuilding, you will be able to spend your energy in positive ways instead of being in a mental fog of confusion, mingled with panic and regret.

Dealing directly with your emotions will reduce tension and stress on you, and allow you to have more energy to deal with a difficult situation. However, if you stuff your fears and frustrations in a disaster like this one, your emotions can quickly blow up without warning. Exploding in rage on your children, your marriage partner or a volunteer at a water station will only make a difficult situation worse. It's not their fault, and it's not yours. This is a terrible situation full of loss and difficulty for everyone. By taking action now you can move beyond feeling overwhelmed by intense stress, anger or confusion. As you follow the insight from this recovery guide, you will be taking positive steps to rebuild with the focused energy of an even stronger life for you and your family after the storm.

To best survive the storm, you need a strong combination of three key elements-healthy coping skills, healthy supports and a healthy perspective of how to rebuild after a natural disaster. While things will never be the same as they were before the storm; the

following guidelines will give you the key elements needed to get past the overwhelming stress and to find even greater strength on the other side of the storm.

- What are the dangerous warning signs of “storm stress syndrome”?

Stress from the storm affects everyone however; it becomes dangerous to our health if it goes on for an extended period of time. Storm Stress can affect adults, children, the elderly and even pets, so it is important to be alert to watch for the danger signs of the psychological condition called, ‘Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder’, (*commonly referred to as PTSD*), in yourself, your family members and coworkers. In natural disasters like hurricanes I refer to these symptoms as “Storm Stress Syndrome”. These symptoms include any dramatic change in emotions, behavior, thought patterns or physical symptoms over the next few days, weeks and even months. Since this has been a terribly stressful time for everyone and will likely remain stressful for some time to come there are a number of factors to be aware of to keep yourself and those who you care about safe.

Storm Stress Warning Signs-

These signs are indicators that the intense stress from the critical incident is beginning to overwhelm the individual. The longer the stress symptoms occur-the greater the severity of the traumatic event on the individual. This does not imply craziness or personal weakness; rather, it simply indicates that the stress levels from the storm were too powerful for the person to manage and their body is reacting to the abnormal situation of being in a natural disaster.

It’s normal to feel completely overwhelmed by a natural disaster like a hurricane; however there are danger signs to watch for in yourself or others that may indicate psychological trauma. Adults or children who display any of the following stress symptoms may need additional help dealing with the events of this crisis. It is strongly recommended that you seek the appropriate medical or psychological assistance if you see many of the physical, emotional, cognitive or behavioral symptoms listed below in you, your coworkers, or someone in your family or home.

Physical Symptoms:

Chills, thirst, fatigue, nausea, fainting, vomiting, dizziness, weakness, chest pain, headaches, elevated blood pressure, rapid heart rate, muscle tremors, difficulty breathing, shock symptoms, and so on.

Emotional Symptoms:

Fear, guilt, grief, panic, denial, anxiety, irritability, depression, apprehension, emotional shock, and feeling overwhelmed, loss of emotional control, and so on.

Cognitive Symptoms:

Confusion, nightmares, uncertainty, hyper-vigilance, suspiciousness, intrusive images, poor problem solving, poor abstract thinking, poor attention/memory and concentration, disorientation of time, places or people, difficulty identifying objects or people, heightened or lowered alertness, and so on.

Behavioral Symptoms:

Withdrawal, antisocial acts, inability to rest, intensified pacing, erratic movements, changes in social activity, changes in speech patterns, loss of or increase of appetite, increased alcohol consumption, and so on.

If you are in doubt about these symptoms in your life, or someone you care about, it is wise to seek the care of a physician or certified mental health professional. I urge you to actively deal with the stressful emotions directly to help yourself and your loved ones to immediately cope with this crisis because these emotions tend to get more intense if left untreated. Remember that there are many experienced professionals who can help you right now. You do not have to go through this alone.

Take action now to prevent stress after the storm from continuing to overwhelm you or the people you care about. Call a trusted friend to talk through it, reach out to clergy, or call your family doctor or counselor. If you don't know someone to call about these emotional issues, you can reach out for assistance by calling telephone hotlines which are offered at no cost to you. The Hurricane Hotline is staffed by the trained counselors of United Healthcare of Florida and they are open 24 hours a day to take your crisis calls at 1-866-319-4480. If you, or someone you care about are feeling overwhelmed by stress, anxiety, guilt or grief it's important to make the call now to learn how to get past the pressure to begin to feel 'okay' again.

- How can I help my family get back to "normal" after these hurricanes?

Hurricanes are one of the most expensive disasters because of the deadly combination of water, wind and floods. It may take months to perhaps even a year for everyone to feel that things are back to "normal." The actual psychological impact of the storm will vary widely between people based on factors like their age, their previous experiences with storm recovery and most significantly how much stress they already had in their life before the storms made land-fall beginning with Hurricane Charley on the Southwest coast of Florida on August 13, 2004. And then followed by Hurricanes Frances, Ivan and Jeanne. The more stress someone had in their life prior to the storms, the longer it takes to recover, and with the additional stress of four major hurricanes in just over six weeks, the stress levels have dramatically increased on everyone affected by these storms.

Here are some immediate ways to bring order and calmness back into your life after the chaos and confusion that follows a natural disaster like these hurricanes.

1) Reconnect in relationships -

You can't get through this crisis alone. Since we all were impacted differently, it is vitally important to talk about the stress and pressures you have experienced with the people closest to you. Reach out to friends and family as soon as possible, and call people you haven't heard from in a while. Just checking in to see if they are okay will only take a few minutes, but it will empower and help both of you. Simply talk about what each of you experienced through the hurricane and how you got through the storm.

Tremendous connection can occur through crisis, so this is an especially good time to reach out to friends or family who may have drifted away from your closest circle of relationship. Take action now to reach out to people with words of encouragement and support, but don't wait for someone else to call you-their phone may not work! Go find them and then reconnect the relationship while helping each other rebuild.

2) Rebuild your routines-

This is one of the most important factors to quickly get life back on track because we all draw strength and security from a structured daily routine. Bed time, dinner time, getting up to go to school, or work, or church or the gym to work out. To regain strength quickly

identify what your normal routines were before the storm-and then get back to them as soon as possible. Even if you are staying in a hotel or with family members for a while, stick with the rituals that you have typically followed that make up your daily lifestyle. This way you will feel the comfort of your routines, regardless of the stress of the many changes happening around you.

3) Reach out for faith-

In times of crisis everyone believes in the power of prayer and the importance of their faith. There is tremendous strength in knowing what you believe and living in harmony with those beliefs and values. Plugging back into your faith after the storm will allow you to release anxiety over the things that you know are too big for you, because you can trust God to handle them. Dedicate a few minutes or perhaps even an hour per day to quiet meditation and reflection on what matters most if you want to continue to grow strong in spite of the storm. This is especially important when you or your children may feel lost, alone or afraid. God cares and taking time to pray and release those burdens will help you make it through the rest of your day. Many churches and houses of faith have disaster and recovery teams, support services and even financial assistance available to help their members cope with the crisis. Helping others in need is one of the greatest ways people of faith model what they believe, so avoid the tendency of being "too nice" to ask for help if you need it. Having a committed personal faith combined with the connection of a local house of worship will give you a tremendous sense of community to get through this storm as well as the ones to come.

4) Retell your story-

Young and old alike will benefit from hearing about how other people survived what will likely be the worst hurricane they will ever go through. There is tremendous power in telling your story; healing power for you and helpful power for others who will gain insight and strength by hearing how creative people can become through the crisis. As you speak up about what happened, it will make it easier for other family members or coworkers to talk about their feelings of loss as well. Things will never be the same as before, but life will go on and we will rebuild and get through it together. Telling your story now will give you additional strength as well as connect you to the neighbors and friends who tell you theirs.

- How does a critical incident like this affect kids?

It depends on the age of the child. The younger the child, the more they look to their parents for emotional security and strength. If a Mom or Dad are "shell-shocked" or "numb" and not able to manage their own emotions or responsibilities; the child will feel that pressure and become very confused and further stressed. Remember, it's normal to be overwhelmed by this major hurricane, which is one of the worst in the history of our state. This is why it's going to be so important to take care of yourself in order to take care of your children through the long period of recovery and rebuilding after the storm.

Think about the advice given on commercial airliners to parents traveling with small children. "Should there be an unexpected cabin de-pressurization; oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling. Place the mask over your nose and mouth like this and then place the mask over the mouth and nose of those around you needing assistance." Take care of your own emotional needs first, and then you will be in a stronger position to help those around you. If you feel overwhelmed in giving your children or others who may depend on you for support, please ask for help. It's okay to be tired, worn out and overly stressed. That's normal for a situation like this one. However, it's not okay to ignore

caring for the needs of those counting on you like children, the elderly or pets. Sometimes a parent may need to make adjustments at work or change their own schedules for a while by delegating some tasks in order to have time and energy to help their children avoid feeling more pressure because of this difficult time. If you feel that your caregiver tank is empty, let someone else help you for a while until you get your strength back. That's best for you and for those that you care about.

When you can focus and dedicate attention to the needs of the child, notice what they are saying, drawing or doing to determine if they are still feeling overly stressed from the storm. School age kids need to talk, draw or take positive action, (like having a lemonade stand to raise money for kids just like them who are now storm victims because their homes were destroyed), so if you give them something to do to help, they can take positive action and sort through their emotions immediately. High school age kids may try to act "cool" about everything, but often are more scared about the changes, losses and confusion than any other group. They are older and may need to experience a bit more "reality" at times to loosen up their ability to talk about what is happening around them. If they are willing to talk to their siblings, or other family members, it won't be long before they can grow strong enough to deal with things in any setting.

Mostly watch for danger signs by noticing any dramatic changes in behavior. If a child was always happy go lucky before the storm and now sits all day to watch video footage of world disasters on the news- then you may want to figure out why they made such a dramatic shift in personality. Watch for other major changes in sleep patterns, school patterns, school performance, peer relations and so on. If you see major changes that concern you, it's time to seek professional attention for the child with their pediatrician or with a child behavioral specialist

- What are some ways to help our kids talk about storm stress?

You can reach out to children in many ways to help them deal with this stressful time of rebuilding after the storm. Talking, writing, drawing, even making up a song about the experience with the hurricanes will make the time pass more quickly, and may even lighten someone else's load of emotional pain and difficulty while helping you back through the process. Some families even play board games like the "worst case scenario," (which is based on actual survival information from a book by the same name). Many of the issues discussed in the game aren't likely to happen to the majority of people on the planet, (such as how to survive a shark attack), talking about any crisis event in life can help kids learn the basics of moving from the panic of basic survival to building strengths through problem solving.

- Are there any "hidden dangers" the in media that parents should be concerned about that might make storm stress worse?

Too much media exposure is dangerous for kids. It is better to get a media "news update" once or perhaps at the most, twice a day to avoid the danger of media over exposure. Leaving the news on all the time will depress the mood of the person who hears it; since deep down inside we learn to go "numb" to the normal emotions of the stressful event, to press on and burn reserve energy in the process. If your child didn't watch the morning news programs before the hurricane hit, be cautious about allowing them to watch TV news alone or having long blocks of unaccounted time with too much isolation. Best is to sort through media outlets-like television, Internet, radio or newspapers, which may contain content that is overly stressful or just too depressing for

a child. Then set boundaries to protect them from additional stress in media stories, since it is important to protect their home and minds by managing the media around them.

It's wise to move from negatives to positives in highly charged and difficult situations like this. We have all seen enough negative images to last a life time and things are still being discovered and played back over again and again in media. Also, parents and kids can sit down and discuss why they really need to have so many media and entertainment services available in their homes. Many families found that not having the Internet, cable television and loud music playing in their homes all the time allowed them to reconnect as a family in communication. By sitting down and discussing these issues your home can be a more positive place, with just enough energy to manage the stress of this situation.

Since watching other peoples problems in other parts of the country will cause more stress in an already stressful situation it's better to focus on your responsibilities today, right here in your own community. When things in your life are strong again, you and your kids won't be as affected by the images of crisis from other places. But that's another day, so for now, just focus on getting you and your kids through the day that we have been handed without making it harder because of the hidden stress of media overexposure.

- What can people expect in the weeks ahead?

"Hurry up and wait," will be the motto that a lot of people will think about in the days ahead. This is because the daily life activities like filling up a gas tank, taking a warm shower, or driving through a busy intersection on a green turn arrow, have been dramatically disrupted. Life is going to be out of balance for weeks or perhaps even months, and no one is going to like it, but we all have to get through it.

There may be long lines for many of the products or services necessary to survive or care for our loved ones so prepare now for the fact that it is going to be difficult sometimes. These hurricanes have killed hundreds of people, shattered billboards and traffic lights, splintered thousands of trees, shredded awnings and screen rooms, ripped apart electric-cable-phone transmission lines, snapped off traffic signs, seriously damaged tens of thousands of homes and caused almost twenty billion dollars in damage to Florida. Millions of people were seriously affected and it's going to take weeks for some things to even be evaluated for repair and significantly longer than that for them to be replaced. We need to mentally prepare for the fact that the damage from this storm will take weeks to clean up and months to perhaps even a year to rebuild from.

Know that this will be hard on everyone involved but we can get through it with a lot less stress if we work together. Here's a formula I developed to help victims recover from this type of crisis event faster. It spells out the word "P.A.T." which stands for

Patience-

Things are going to take a lot longer than normal. Focus on the reality of why things are disorganized or confusing after the storm, instead of getting angry at everything that doesn't go your way. The more you let your anger build, the more likely you will dump it on the people you love. That is irresponsible and wrong, so don't do it. Deal directly with the pressure of this recovery time by building a deeper understanding of the

situation and what you can actually do about it, instead of feeling angry and helpless about what you can't do anything about right now. Being moody and continually irritated will not make things better for anyone, but can make a bad situation worse for everyone involved. Why add more stress to an already over-stressed situation?

Attitude-

In a crisis situation you can't afford to waste even a drop of valuable resources like water or gasoline-and you should be equally cautious about wasting emotional energy by worrying about things you can't change. It's time to go with the flow of difficult situations, instead of trying to fight against it. You can't control this difficult situation and if you try it will only lead to greater levels of anxiety and stress. Better to keep focused on positive things like counting your blessings, instead of counting your problems. Anxiety, stress, worry and chronic sleep loss can take a bad situation like this one and turn it into an abusive, or out of control one in a matter of days. Protect your attitude and you will significantly protect your ability to deal with the challenges that lie ahead.

Trust-

This one is hard because we tend to get angry and resentful in the days and weeks after a critical incident. However, it is essential to know that the crews responsible to take action to repair the daily life activities we tend to take for granted, (like electricity, water, gas, phone and cable services), are working 24/7 shifts to accomplish that important goal.

This includes staff from the power company, the phone company, the tree services, the cell phone company, the cable television company, the Internet providers, the insurance adjusters, the FEMA workers, the department of transportation workers replacing signs and traffic lights, the fire fighters, the police officers, the doctors, the nurses, the school board officials, the grocery store workers, the gas station attendants, the yard trash collectors and on and on. Trust that everyone is doing the best that they can to get things back on track. They are working double time to get our homes, schools and businesses back on track-count on it. Even better, stop and thank them with your kids if you have a chance. A kind word of "thanks" goes a long way to reduce the stress and frustration that these professionals feel in rebuilding and maintaining the essential services in our community.

- Is it wise to involve kids in the clean up and recovery process?

If it is physically safe for everyone, * I encourage the entire family to visit their damaged home together. It is okay to do clean up and recovery work together as well, since this storm is bigger than any one person could clean up anyway. Stressful events like this can make a marriage or family stronger than ever, because instead of just one person dealing with the loss, the entire family can join in to deal with it together. It's wrong to play the "hero" and try to do everything by yourself as a parent or legal guardian for children because it models being a lone ranger during a crisis.

The 'lone ranger' mentality eventually leads to someone becoming the 'lonely ranger' because you can't get through a crisis alone, nor should you try. We need each other more than ever to successfully manage crisis events like these natural disasters. Another reason why this is so important is that viewing the destruction firsthand, (obviously in age appropriate ways), is one of the best ways to allow children to see how dangerous storms can be. And the most important reason to model this behavior to our younger kids is because they learn from their earliest childhood that families who stick

together through the entire process can get through it better and faster than those who go it alone.

***IMPORTANT NOTICE! ***

Think about the term, “childproofed” home as you determine what environment would be safe for your youngest children or grandchildren to be walking through or around. If they normally aren't around power tools or gas powered construction equipment like generators or chain-saws, then this is not the time to start. Be safe and don't make a stressful situation worse by risking injury to yourself, your children or your loved ones

- Is it okay to talk about what happened to our family with others?

Silence is not golden in a critical incident, rather, it's dangerous. One of the best things that you can do to help yourself and help others is to tell your story. Talk about where you were when the storm came through. Talk about how you and your loved ones made it through the crisis to the other side. Keep talking and make it a point to listen carefully as you hear the stories of others who survived this terrible storm. This is important for everyone involved, kids, grandparents, Mom, dads, employees, employers, firefighters, police officers, nurses, teachers, students and on and on. Everyone has a story about how they got through these killer hurricanes and telling it will help them heal and may give you a new chance to connect with your family, neighbors and coworkers in a powerful way. Also, don't miss asking your own pastor, priest, rabbi, or spiritual authority since many times these professionals are so busy listening to the needs of others, they neglect to take time to reduce the stress that they feel.

- Why do some people seem to become bitter or hateful after a crisis like this one, instead of just being grateful to be alive?

A disaster like this “dumps out” whatever is inside of a person, so you will see the best and the worst of behavior in the days ahead. This natural disaster was overwhelming to everyone, so be prepared for some unusual emotional reactions in yourself and the people around you. Sometimes people who were the most hurting before the storm will act wonderful and kind on the other side of recovering from this type of traumatic event. It's like they find a hidden strength in a crisis and reach out to others in a new way. Others just go numb and will seem to act like they are robots. Some people will get loud and others will become unusually quiet. There are many reasons for the wide range of emotional response; with a common factor being how many difficult and traumatic experiences they may have already witnessed in their lives. Hopefully, some people may have already sorted through these deep hurts and strong emotions before these killer hurricanes hit. If so, they may have a deeper understanding of the need for compassion to others in a crisis. They understand about the storms in life and react with kindness, sometimes it may even seem to come automatically for them to reach out with positive emotions instead of being critical.

Other people can get completely cutting, hateful and mean in everything that they say and do, even if they weren't that way before the storm. They may even try to chase you off with a broom if you try to help them clean up the broken limbs in their yard! Don't panic, they probably aren't having a breakdown, rather it's likely a behavior some people call being ‘hardhearted.’ This comes from year's worth of unresolved past hurts being piled up and never addressed or resolved. Try not to take it personally if the criticism comes your way. Remember the rule that "hurt people- hurt people" and take their negative comments with a grain of salt while still attempting to maintain

integrity in caring for others who may be able to receive the offer of a helping hand to get through this difficult time

- What is survivor guilt and how does it negatively impact people?

Thousands of people didn't lose power or anything else, and now they feel uncomfortable with being blessed instead of being grateful for the blessings. Remember to manage your affairs at home and then at the office in a responsible way, and to pace yourself through the process. Doing too much/too soon can exhaust you and limit your ability to live out your priorities in your immediate family. Helping others at the expense of protecting and helping your own family seems wrong to me, although I know that there are emergency exceptions to that rule at times. Best is to pace yourself in the race to recover and rebuild. This hurricane season will end, but if you over do-things you may end up hurting yourself and make your own future a lot worse. If your home is okay and you can get to work, be the happiest person there and don't allow the inconveniences of daily life, like having to do without hot water or cable television, to get you down.

- So many people are worse off than me - so how can I decide who to help?

Help others when you can, but not at the expense of making your situation worse. A simple way to decide who to help and when it might be wrong to offer assistance is to consider these three key elements.

Evaluate Relationship-

First determine your level of relationship to the people in need. Begin with 'self-care' and practice the steps to keep yourself safe in the recovery and rebuilding process. If you get seriously hurt trying to help someone else, you haven't really helped anyone and in fact may make a bad situation much worse. Once you know that you are safe and stable, then reach out to offer help your closest relationships, which are usually the people you live with or around. This includes your family, children, marriage partner, elder adults who may live with or near you and your dearest friends. Not everyone outside of your closest 'circle' may need your help or assistance, but it's wise to ask them just in case.

Once you get past those closest to you, then you can reach out to offer assistance to those in need you may know in your neighborhood, church or workplace. After you are able to help the people you know at that level of relationship, then you can reach out to those you may be less connected to in your community, state or region of the country. Everyone has needs, and it is for certain that we all will need some level of help to get through this storm recovery process. 'Lone rangers' wear out fast and eventually can't help anyone, so help others when you can and allow them to help you as the level of relationship allows. No one can rebuild after this kind of disaster alone and as you come alongside to help others, or allow them to help you a greater sense of relationship and connection will develop which makes you both stronger.

Measure Resources -

If you are attempting to reach out to help others, you need to first evaluate what resources you have to work with. These are the very limited supplies of time, energy and money. Most people have to maintain responsibility to the important elements of their jobs no matter what the storm damage may have done to their place of business. So if you are in a situation that requires a 50 or sometimes even 60 hour a week commitment during the storm rebuilding process, you will have very limited supplies of time and energy at the end of the day to help others in need. Wise financial planning may have

given you a nest egg to draw from, but no one has enough money to solve the problems of the world. If you don't have the resources of time, energy and money to responsibly care for you and those who depend on you, it would be wrong to spend those resources on strangers. Don't let the crisis events of others you may see on a television news story get in the way of caring for those closest to you. As you wisely manage the resources of your circle of closest friends and family members you all will grow stronger after the storm.

Do the Right Thing-

After you have determined the level of relationship in need and then measured the resources available to help, then you are ready to apply these three questions necessary to wisely help others impacted by the storm.

1) Is there a Rule? Consider if this situation falls under the guidelines of an accepted standard in our society, such as a law, statute, spiritual principle or guideline. For instance, if I'm in a hurry and racing to get to a store to buy storm supplies and cause an automobile accident it's clearly my fault and I have to pay for the damages. However, many issues that arise out of a disaster aren't very easy to understand and don't fit into commonly known laws, statutes or principles. When that happens, ask yourself the next question.

2) Is it Responsible? Does the situation that you are considering getting involved in make common sense or seem to be a wise use of time, energy or money as discussed earlier? If it seems impulsive or poorly thought out, wisdom would suggest that waiting until a better plan could be developed would bring better and longer lasting results. This approach also helps prevent a lot of accidents after a disaster because considering the responsible path may prevent bad decisions that were well meaning, but brought more problems than solutions. Like when a well meaning person buys a chainsaw to cut a tree off of a neighbor's house and hasn't stopped to realize that they have never used a chain saw! There are often more accidents or deaths in the days after a major disaster because of irresponsible decisions. Prevent that by taking time to seriously think through what your involvement will actually accomplish. As a wise carpenter once said, "measure twice-cut once."

3) Is it Reasonable? Consider the real reasons that have led you to believe that you are the best person to jump in to help others in this situation. Do you have the skill set, the experience or training to perform certain tasks that you are considering? An example of this would be well meaning people who show up to help after an accident, but don't have the medical training to even know what to do, or people who really want to help with patching holes in roofs or removing tree limbs tangled up in power lines. It is unreasonable and irresponsible to place yourself into a dangerous situation that you aren't prepared to deal with. A better approach is to assess what you reasonably can do right now and then do it. (Some examples would be calling 911 to get someone medical help, or waiting in line for ice and bottled water for a neighbor, or doing five loads of laundry for someone who doesn't have electricity, or letting someone use your cell phone to call their family members to let them know that they are safe after the storm, or offering to buy lunch at a fast-food restaurant for a tired mother with small children who just need to get out of a hot house for a few hours to take a break) . There are countless things that you can do to add value in a crisis situation without being in the wrong place possibly creating problems for others. Taking reasonable action brings positive results.

Following these steps will allow you to grow stronger through the storm, while helping others to grow along with you on the journey of rebuilding our community after the storm.

- What should people consider when first returning to their homes after being evacuated before the storm?

You need to mentally prepare for the loss by remembering that things in this life can be damaged by wind, water, fire and falling trees. Our lives and the lives of those that we love are much more valuable than anything in our homes. Whatever the destruction looks like now, remember that it can and eventually will be repaired in time. Keep repeating to yourself phrases like, "It's just stuff anyway," or "the more things you have, the more things have you," or even "our family is safe-and that's all that matters since the rest is just a house that collects dust anyway." Changing your mind about things will allow you to control your most powerful asset, your own internal drives, personal beliefs and choices, which is the emotional "grid": that all other emotions go through. Change that, and you will be able to make even more positive changes in your daily life.

- What final thought can you give to encourage us through this recovery process?

Stress can lead you to a greater level of success if you allow it; which is the primary focus you need to grow through a difficult situation like this one. You will make it through the crisis and you will survive if you take action to connect to your supports, use positive coping skills and develop the mindset of looking for strength beyond the storm. The biggest part of this process is to reach out and link arms with others who were impacted by this storm just like you were. Supporting others gives you a significantly greater level of strength than if you ever tried to stand alone through the crisis. Finding strength in storms by linking arms with others is what the massive Redwood trees in California do to withstand incredible pressure.

Redwoods are massive trees, many are over 300 feet high, and yet only have root systems that go 4-5 feet deep. Why don't they fall over in a gentle breeze? Simple. The mighty Redwoods never grow alone. They link their roots together and withstand ten times the stress and pressure because they are not alone in the storm. They need each other to stand strong and so do we. This crisis has given us a chance to stand strong together, just like the Redwoods do. This is our time to get focused, build healthy coping skills into our daily life and be surrounded by strong people who have the heart and resources to stand firm by living out what they believe. And it's time for you to stand alongside them as we all come together to rebuild our community after the storm.

No matter what the size of crisis event, you can find strength after the storm because moving beyond the stress is the beginning of finding greater success. Following the action steps in this resource guide will allow you to begin building strength back into your personal and professional life in spite of the storms. As you grow stronger you can tell others, which will encourage them to press on as they rebuild their lives, right next to yours. Stronger people create stronger communities and that is the journey you have already begun. I encourage you to stay with it as you build an even stronger life after the storm.

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