

Disaster Anniversaries: Supporting Mental Health and Well-Being

The impact of a natural disaster can remain in a community for months or even years after the disaster has occurred. Natural disasters are a major disruption that can affect one's ability to return to work, school or home. The financial burden of repairing property damage can also be significant. The lengthy recovery process can cause tremendous stress. Witnessing destruction or losing livestock can lead to a rise in anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress. A rise in mental health concerns has also been observed in other parts of the country impacted by natural disasters. Over 6 months after Hurricane Sandy, 14.5% of adults reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. One third of Hurricane Katrina survivors displaced in Houston reported an increase in substance abuse after the storm. On the flip side, research conducted by Montclair State University also found that over 60% of Hurricane Katrina survivors displayed resilience (Brainfacts.org). The survivors that had access to emotional/social supports and financial resources were more optimistic about the future than those that did not have access to supports.

The anniversary of the 2019 flood is approaching, which may trigger anxiety or cause signs of distress to resurface. Media coverage of the flood or speculation of a future flood can also cause stress and fears, particularly in children. Stress or mental health issues can impact physical health, school or work performance and overall quality of life. Being familiar with the warning signs of a mental health issue and the resources available to help cope, is a good way to remain healthy.

Reactions to a natural disaster may include:

- Nightmares
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Bedwetting in young children (that was not present before the event)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Somatic Problems (headaches, stomach aches & digestive problems)
- Changes in eating habits
- Irritability
- Emotional outbursts
- Substance Abuse
- Depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress

Why are children at greater risk?

Children under the age of 8 are particularly at risk for mental health issues after a natural disaster. This is because they do not understand the situation the same way adults do. Children also feel less control over events and have less experience coping with difficult situations (CDC). Children that have a mental health diagnosis or have experienced trauma are at an even

greater risk for having a mental health issue after a disaster. Ways to support young children after a disaster:

- Provide opportunities to talk and ask questions
- Create a safe space
- Limit exposure to media coverage of the event; be particularly aware of this on the anniversary of the event
- Collaborate with their school to provide support

Disaster Anniversaries

Disaster anniversaries can be a time of emotional healing and reflection, but they can also be an emotional trigger. An emotional reaction to a disaster anniversary may include flashbacks, anger, sleep disturbances or anxiety for days or weeks. These reactions can also be similar to those that occurred after the initial event (listed above). Literature defines anniversary reactions as an “individual’s response to unresolved grief resulting from significant losses” (SAMHSA). However, not all survivors will experience a reaction. Survivors may experience anniversary reactions for months or years after the initial event occurred. Media coverage of the anniversary and weather changes that are similar to the event can trigger emotional reactions. Individuals with high amounts of stress may be more sensitive to emotional triggers than others. Emotional triggers are not always easy to recognize and can vary from person to person.

Ways to respond to a disaster anniversary:

- Practice good self-care; this could be taking time for an activity you enjoy, practicing mindfulness or trying a new activity
- Take care of yourself; eat healthy, get plenty of sleep, and exercise
- Talk about your feelings
- Seek help when needed
- Limit your exposure to media accounts of the event

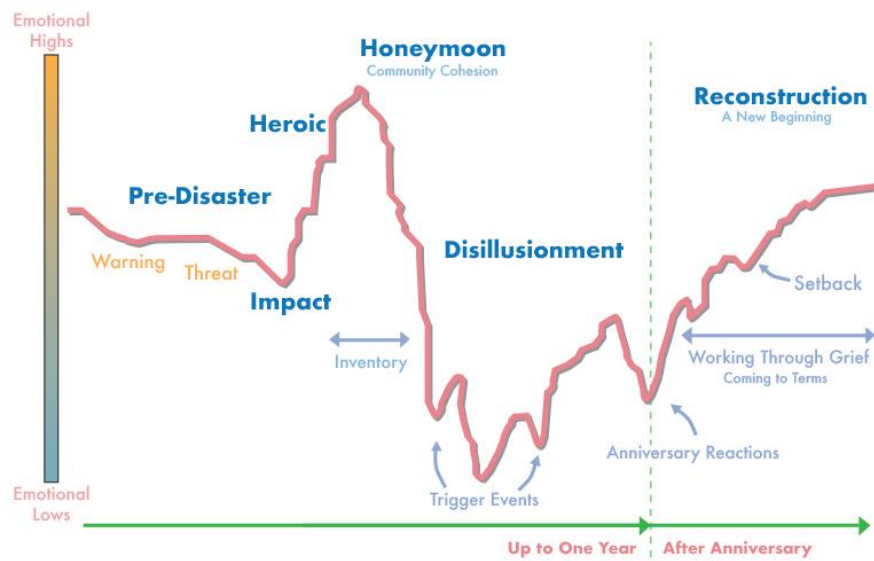
Ways to help youth cope with the disaster anniversary:

- Talk to them about their fears and concerns and be honest in your response
- Model positive behaviors like self-care
- Maintain routines
- Provide additional support at bedtime
- Provide opportunities for youth to learn from the event
- Limit exposure to media and sensitive material surrounding the event

Community Response:

- Acknowledge the anniversary and progress that has been made
- Plan an event to recognize progress and thank stake holders that have contributed to recovery efforts
- Provide opportunities for debriefing and discussion of the anniversary

The recovery process can take years. Not only is there physical damage that needs to be repaired, but emotional grief needs time to heal. Anniversary reactions are normal. Recognize what your emotional triggers are and how to respond to them. Become familiar with the warning signs of mental health concerns and don't be afraid to ask for help for you or a loved one. The event anniversary is also an opportunity to heal and reflect on the progress that has been made. Take advantage of the opportunity to connect with family, friends and community members to heal together.



References: www.brainfacts.org; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; SAMHSA; National Alliance on Mental Illness