



# After Weathering The Storm, Hurricane Harvey Victims Still Cope With Trauma


By EDITOR · SEP 3, 2017

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MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

As the floodwaters start to recede, those affected by the storm are coming to terms with what they have lost - their homes in many cases, yes, their furniture, yes, but also possibly jobs, pets, irreplaceable possessions such as photos or family heirlooms. And that got us thinking about how this can affect people's mental health, so we reached out to someone who knows quite a bit about this.

Joy Osofsky is a professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at Louisiana State University. During Hurricane Katrina, she was dispatched by the state of Louisiana to help set up an emergency psychology unit in New Orleans to help treat civilians and emergency responders. I started our conversation by asking how the residents in Houston and other affected areas should approach their well-being during such a traumatic time.

JOY OSOFSKY: The important message now is to try to bring people together, and you certainly see that happening, to help support each other in many ways, for families to help support each other. If families have been separated, to try to bring families together as soon as possible, even though conditions may not be ideal.

Our experience has been that if people were able to get back to their environment, even if there was destruction, that they tended, in general, to do better than those who were unable to get back. And those who were able to stay together as families to help support children and to come back in some way in their community was a means of moving forward.

MARTIN: Is there a difference in the way that children and adults respond to these kinds of events that we should talk about?

OSOFSKY: Yes because children, depending on the age of children, are dependent on their parents or caretakers. So the younger children really need support from people who are there to protect them, who are most often parents and caregivers. And as the children get older, they get more support from peers in many ways. So one of the messages that we heard over and over again when children were evacuated is they couldn't see their friends. In this circumstance, as I understand it, there still is cellphone coverage and Wi-Fi available, which will be helpful in that way.

But that was a very important issue for older children being able to talk to their friends and share with their friends and tell them their experiences as well. The other thing that's very helpful for older children is being able to help rebuild, whether it's their house or their school or do something that helps other people so they feel like they can do something worthwhile in a very difficult situation.





MARTIN: What I wanted to ask you, though, I think that, you know, right now, the entire country is focused on this area. People are very engaged, very concerned. But after a certain point, people in other parts of the country who are not dealing with this go back to their own lives and preoccupations and may forget that people have experienced something as traumatic as this. I'm wondering, how long do people experience the effects of a trauma like this?

OSOFSKY: You need to be thinking about it for a long time. I mean, one of the things that we've all learned with Hurricane Harvey is there are many, many thousands of people that evacuated from Hurricane Katrina to Texas, a lot in Houston and other parts of Texas, and resettled there. So for those people and families of those people, this reawakens things, you know. And the pictures of the flooding brings back actually post-traumatic stress symptoms. So for those people, you know, they're going to have to go through a process.

But it is a long process because if people have lost their home and everything that was dear to them, really not the couches and the lamps and those types of things but the pictures of their children growing up and things that were a part of their life are no longer there. And even the home, maybe they raised their children in and they lived in for 30 years. You know, those kinds of adjustments will take a very long time.

MARTIN: That's Joy Osofsky. She's a professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at Louisiana State University. She was actually kind enough to interrupt a family visit overseas to talk with us about this. Professor Osofsky, thanks so much for speaking with us.

OSOFSKY: And thank you very much for reaching out and doing what you're doing. Transcript provided by NPR, Copyright NPR.


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