

Coping with natural disaster

Iowa Psychological Association offers tips to manage weather-related stress

Cedar Rapids, IA 6-16-08 – When natural disasters strike, people feel overwhelmed and helpless. The forces of nature can destroy homes, businesses and lives in an instant. Unexpected tornadoes and floods, such as we have recently suffered in Iowa, overwhelm our capacity to cope. When that happens, our natural response is to withdraw and become numb and depressed. The more helpless one feels, the greater the likelihood that psychological aftereffects of the trauma will continue. People may become disoriented, unable to relax and unable to decide on a course of action. They may have trouble sleeping and may have vivid nightmares in which they relive the tragedy. Other stress symptoms include loss of appetite, aches and pains, tearfulness, irritability, anger and fear. If these symptoms are severe enough the person may be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Even if the symptoms are less severe, a person's ability to live normally is compromised.

When lives become unmanageable, many will use unhealthy ways to deal with stress, such as staying up late, mindlessly watching TV or surfing the net, eating, drinking or smoking excessively, and taking too many medications or illegal drugs. According to the American Psychological Association's "2007 Stress in America" poll, many Americans choose unhealthy ways to cope with their stress. More than 40 percent said they overeat or eat unhealthy foods; 48 percent said they couldn't sleep because of stress; and two-thirds of smokers said they smoke even more when stressed. But relying on harmful behaviors to alleviate stress contributes to physical and emotional health problems in the future.

Don Damsteegt, Public Education Committee chair of the The Iowa Psychological Association offers these strategies for managing stress:

Identify your stressors and make a plan. Take a look at your particular situation and what causes you stress. Write down specifically what is causing you stress. Putting things down on paper and helps you organize your mind and can reduce stress. Then make a list of action steps that can be taken. Prioritize your list and commit to doing the most important thing immediately.

Talk about your worries. Many are secretive about feelings or problems, especially when things aren't going well, and this can lead to more stress. Open up to your partner, a trusted friend or family member about your concerns. Consider talking to a counselor or religious leader. Talking about feelings takes away some of the pain.

Recognize how you deal with stress. Comfort eating, smoking, drinking, gambling or withdrawing will not help solve problems. Pay attention to how you deal with it, and consider the extra damage that negative coping methods do to your health.

Substitute healthy for unhealthy ways to manage stress. Healthy stress-reducing

activities usually have two components - stress reduction and problem solving. Many stress reducing activities are inexpensive and quick—take a short walk, meditate, pray, exercise or talk things out with friends or family. Anything which helps one disconnect from the problem is stress reducing. Sometimes a person needs to withdraw and grieve for a period of time. Problem solving, on the other hand, means facing the problem directly. Take action to actually change the things that cause you stress. If you're feeling overwhelmed by disaster news on the television, turn it off. If you have suffered loss, begin to plan for replacing the loss. Start with a small problem. In most cases solving one problem will give you energy to tackle other problems. Focus on coping one day at a time and on changing one thing at a time.

Counselors, pastors and friends are available to help you talk things through. If you continue to be overwhelmed by stress or by the unhealthy behaviors you use to cope, you may want to talk with a psychologist who can help you address the factors behind your emotions. Psychologists are experts on dealing with stress and are trained to understand the connection between the mind and body, as well as the factors that promote behavior change. For more information on stress and mind/body health, visit www.apahelpcenter.org.

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