**PAESTA Podcast Series – You Asked, We Answered!**

**Episode 40 – What are the mental impacts of weather and climate disaster?**

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Hello my name is Allysa and I am a student at Penn State Brandywine. Today I will be answering the question “What are the mental impacts of weather and climate disaster?”. First off, weather and climate disasters are like natural disasters. They are major adverse events resulting from a natural process of the earth and can include floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, and natural processes of the earth. We hear about natural disasters often on the news or weather channels where they try to predict when a storm or something of the sort is coming our way and warn us, the people, to evacuate if they feel it’s going to really bad. Some natural disasters that made big news include The tsunami in Thailand in 2004 and hurricane Katrina that hit New Orleans hard in 2005.

Natural disasters are something we can’t control but that can come quickly and shake our lives forever. People who are involved have most likely seen, experienced, and lost things that are unimaginable to us. First, people can experience shock immediately after. This reaction can be a combination of shock and denial. [1] This can last for a bit of time, maybe days or weeks. After that people usually have feelings of insecurity. Home is supposed to be a safe place and when that’s taken from you, it is hard to feel secure again. Some things that come from this feeling of insecurity are nightmares, anxiety, or extreme preparation in fear for the next storm. [2] With this anxiety and stress, posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD can follow. PTSD is a mental health condition that’s triggered by a terrifying event. The symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety. [3] Other long-term issues that can come from these events are depression, issues with eating and obsessive compulsive disorder also known as OCD.

Those whose homes were affected are not the only ones subject to these possible aftermath symptoms. It has been reported that many people who help clean up on scene or first responders experience many of these psychological symptoms as well. [4] A lot of first responders say that they can be haunted from the wounded people they saw and saved as well as all of those that they were unable to save. [5] Even though they were not there for the actual event, they’re the ones that come in right after it and can see some of the worst of it.

So, we know how natural disasters can affect people, their homes, communities, and families. However it can also affect their relationships with people. Many of those who are victims of an event like this suffer with relationships at school, work, friendships, marriage, or struggle as a parent. [2] With this usually comes distrust, irritability, conflict, withdrawal, isolation, feelings of rejection or abandonment, judgment, or being over controlling. [6]

Although all of these things mentioned are normal reactions to extreme stress like a natural disaster, there are times when those who are affected may need to seek help if certain symptoms do not go away. As we mentioned before, shock and disbelief are normal. People may have a hard time accepting the reality of what happened. There are ways to help reduce these feelings like staying away from media exposure and avoiding distressing images. [4] Watching these things can bring memories back that you’re trying to avoid.

Another suggestion is to accept your feelings by mourning the losses and not forcing the healing process. [2] It may take a long time but by accepting your emotions it is easier to move on and reconnect with uncomfortable emotions with little or no stress and anxiety. It is also encouraged for people to reach out to others because, like I mentioned, it is easy to withdrawal from people after an event like this.

If people surround themselves around others, especially those who have experienced the same event, you can work together to get through the problem and the results can be extremely positive. In fact, victims of Hurricane Katrina reported that the sense of community that was found in the aftermath of the hurricane was unbelievable. [7] They said it restored their faith and lifted their spirits having everyone work together to rebuild their homes and lives.

Shifting gears here, I wanted to talk a little more about climate change and how it affects people. Something that has been talked about more often now than ever is seasonal depression or seasonal affective disorder also known as SAD. Seasonal affective disorder is a mood disorder that affects an individual at the same time every year. For most, it occurs around September or October then the weather gets cooler and lasts until April or May. Between 60% and 90% of those who have this disorder, are women. Woman ages 15 to 55 are the most likely to develop seasonal depression. Interestingly enough, although people think that this disorder is based off of the temperature of the seasons, it really has to do with the sunlight, or lac there of. A new idea of light therapy has become popular in treating this disorder and has shown between a 50 and 80 percent chance of remission. [8]

In conclusion, natural disasters have both short term and long term affects on people. They do affect everyone differently depending on how they handle stress and the person’s role they played in the event. There are warning signs to look for in victims of natural disasters. If you or someone you know has been through a traumatic event like this, and you think they need further help, there are many support groups around as well as counseling available.

So that’s it for the question “what are the mental impacts of weather and climate disaster”. I hope you enjoyed and thanks for listening.

(*This audio file was recorded by Allysa Nuernberg on November 9, 2016*)

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