

Stress, anxiety build as water keeps rising

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Midlands residents anticipating property damage and even evacuation from the spring flooding are already suffering from stress and anxiety.

What are the best ways to cope as flooding intensifies?

We talked to Robin Zagurski, a clinical social worker at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, for advice. Zagurski is a behavioral health first-responder who has worked during the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, the Von Maur shootings and the Little Sioux tornado.

Q. What is the cycle of emotions people anticipating flood damage might typically experience?

A. Common reactions to any kind of disaster range anywhere from anger to sadness, irritability, numbness. Some people feel relieved when it isn't as bad as they anticipated. People can bounce between those. One moment they might feel fine, and another moment they'll feel very angry and irritable.

Q. How is this different from emotions people experience after sudden natural disasters?

A. There's this anticipation and anxiety about what's going to happen. Some of this anxiety comes from asking ourselves unanswerable questions, like, "What am I going to do?" or "How am I going to rebuild?" The best way to handle that is to think about, "What can I control?" and, "What can I handle?" and do some planning.

Q. What emotional responses are typical for people who are forced to evacuate their homes?

A. Well, first, we see our personal belongings as part of our personal space. We see those things as an extension of ourselves. That's why when we're in the airport and they take our suitcase to search, we feel anxiety. That's amplified when you have to evacuate and leave everything behind. There's the worry about, "How am I going to replace things?" "How will I fix my house?" "How will this affect my financial situation for the rest of my life?" The anxiety and the worry are great.

Q. What is the best way to cope with these emotions?

A. Reminding yourself that this is a common reaction. We see these reactions in all kinds of disasters. You have to know that you're not alone. There's nothing wrong with you. What we want you to do is maintain a regular schedule and take good care of yourself. And if the reactions become a problem and start interfering

with your regular functioning, talk to somebody. Part of what we encourage people to do is remember what they've done to cope in the past. Talking to family, friends, faith groups, work partners — the more connections we have in life, the healthier, psychologically and physically, we are. If you're having problems with anxiety, 20 minutes of aerobic exercise in a day can really help relieve that. Also, doing things you enjoy. Even though you might have to clean up from a flood, take 15 minutes in a day to do something that you enjoy and that puts you back together. It doesn't have to be a big thing. And one of the hallmarks of resiliency is being able to look at a situation and see the humor in it.

Q. How can parents help children understand what's happening and deal with their emotional responses?

A. One of the things parents can do first and foremost is make sure they're taking care of themselves. They're setting an example for children. Adequate sleep and nutrition are key. A stable adult in a child's life is the best protective factor we have for children. Depending on the age level of the child, we can involve them in part of the planning — not in the worrying, but say, "There's a chance water will come into our basement. What do you have there that you would want us to bring onto higher ground? What are the things, if we have to evacuate, you want to take with you?" It doesn't matter at this point if their clothes match. If they want to carry a backpack full of stuffed animals around right now, that's OK. We also need to emphasize to children that there have been a lot of people working very hard to make sure they are safe.

Q. How long will these emotions last, and what are signs of deeper psychological problems triggered by the stress?

A. Every individual is different. Some people will have these reactions for a long time. Our concern is when people don't like the way they're reacting or when other people don't like the way someone's reacting. When you're not functioning any more. There is no timeline, just behavior indicators. Inability to sleep. Inability to leave the house. Isolating yourself from others. Changes in your eating, either a lot more or a lot less. Inability to work. Inability to get things done at home.

Q. If we notice these indicators, who should we talk to?

A. If your reactions, or the reactions of someone you love, are concerning to you, the first folks you can call are your primary care providers. But you can also call a therapist who has experience in working with disaster relief. We don't want to pathologize people, but we do want to help them know how to use their coping skills.

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