



Disasters affect all they touch, age groups may have different needs

November 15, 2010

Evansville Courier and Press

In last week's article we discussed reactions and symptoms to expect in children ages 1 to 11 who have been affected by a disaster. Today, we'll provide a list of reactions to look for in children ages 12 to 18 and in adults who have been involved in a disaster.

FOR AGES 12 THROUGH 18

Behavioral symptoms:

- Decline in academic performance
- Rebellion at home and/or school
- Decline in previous responsible behavior
- Agitation or decrease in energy level, apathy
- Delinquent behavior
- Social withdrawal
- Substance use

Physical symptoms:

- Appetite changes
- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Skin eruptions
- Complaints of vague aches and pains
- Sleep disorders

Emotional symptoms:

- Loss of interest in peer social activities, hobbies, recreation
- Sadness or depression
- Resistance to authority
- Feelings of inadequacy and helplessness

Mental health responders pay close attention and consideration to the symptoms and voiced concerns of individuals in this age group. Parents may want to do the following to help children cope during this time: relax

normal expectations of performance at home and school at least temporarily; encourage them to discuss the disaster with their peers and other adults; avoid insisting on discussion of their feelings with you/parents; promote physical activity, resumption of social activities, athletics, clubs etc.; rehearse safety measures and encourage the child to participate in community rehabilitation and reclamation work; encourage the child to get involved in any school disaster programs that may include peer support groups, disaster education and planning, and any expressive activities that may be offered post-disaster.

FOR ADULTS

Behavioral symptoms:

- Sleep problems
- Avoidance of reminders
- Excessive activity level
- Crying easily
- Increased conflicts/abuse/domestic violence with family
- Hypervigilance
- Isolation, withdrawal
- Problematic use/abuse of alcohol/drugs/medications

Physical symptoms:

- Fatigue, exhaustion
- Gastrointestinal distress
- Appetite changes
- Somatic complaints
- Worsening of chronic conditions

Emotional symptoms:

- Depression, sadness
- Irritability, anger
- Anxiety, fear
- Despair, hopelessness
- Guilt, self-doubt

- **Mood swings**

Mental health responders offer disaster survivors supportive listening and the opportunity to talk in detail about their disaster experience. They can help prioritize and problem solve, which can reduce anxiety/stress levels. They offer assistance to family members to facilitate communication and effective functioning post-disaster. They also assess individuals and refer them for more formal services when indicated. Information on referral resources also are made available by mental health responders.

It is also important to remember that older adults also can be affected by disasters. Symptoms that these individuals may present post-disaster include: withdrawal and isolation; reluctance to leave home; mobility limitations; relocation adjustment problems; symptoms from loss or overuse of medications; worsening of chronic conditions; sleep disorders; memory problems; more susceptibility to hypo/hyperthermia. Physical and sensory limitations (sight, hearing) can interfere with recovery.

Older adults also can be affected emotionally and may begin to present with the following symptoms: depression; despair about losses; apathy; confusion/disorientation; suspicion; agitation, anger; anxiety with unfamiliar surroundings; embarrassment about receiving "handouts" and symptoms resulting from loss or overuse of medications.

Interventions that are suggested with this population include: providing strong and persistent verbal reassurance; providing orienting information; assisting with possession recovery and



Southwestern Healthcare, Inc.

Caring for our Communities

In The News Published Article

Disasters affect all they touch, age groups may have different needs

November 15, 2010

Evansville Courier and Press

encouraging discussion of disaster losses and expression of emotions with mental health responders.

Mental health responders will provide multiple assessment methods, as problems may be under-reported, especially medications. As you can see above, medication problems can impact an older adult's behavioral, physical and emotional states. Responders also will help obtain medical/financial assistance, reestablish family/social contacts, and help facilitate referrals for disaster assistance including providers of transportation, meals, home chores and health visits as needed.

If you are interested in learning more or becoming part of the District 10 mental health team, please contact me for additional information.

Jennifer Schuetter-Bromm is a licensed clinical social worker with Southwestern Behavioral Healthcare, Inc. Contact the organization at (812) 436-4221 or comments@southwestern.org.