



## Ten Years after Katrina and Rita: Reactions and Triggers

*“Ten years later, parts of the region and the people affected are still recovering—but this resilient area and its inhabitants are showing important signs of vitality”*

*(Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, 2015).*

As the remembrance of any disaster or traumatic event approaches, many survivors report a return of restlessness and fear. Psychological literature calls it the remembrance reaction and defines it as an individual’s response to unresolved grief resulting from significant losses. The reaction can involve several days or even weeks of anxiety, anger, nightmares, flashbacks, depression or fear.

The remembrance of a disaster or traumatic event also can provide an opportunity for emotional healing. Individuals can make significant progress in working through the natural grieving process by recognizing, acknowledging and paying attention to the feelings and issues that surface during their remembrance reaction.

It is important to note that not all survivors of a disaster or traumatic event experience a remembrance reaction. However, those who do may be troubled because they did not expect and do not understand their reaction. For these individuals, knowing what to expect in advance may be helpful.

Common remembrance reactions among survivors of a disaster or traumatic event include those listed below.

- ▶ **Memories, Dreams, Thoughts and Feelings:** Individuals may replay memories, thoughts and feelings about the event which they can’t turn off. They may see repeated images and scenes associated with the trauma or relive the event over and over. They may have recurring dreams or nightmares. These reactions may be as vivid

on the remembrance as they were at the actual time of the disaster or traumatic event.

- ▶ **Grief and Sadness:** Individuals may experience grief and sadness related to the loss of income, employment, a home or a loved one. Even people who have moved to new homes often feel a sense of loss on the remembrance. Those who were forced to relocate to another community may experience intense homesickness for their old neighborhoods.
- ▶ **Fear and Anxiety:** Fear and anxiety may resurface around the time of the remembrance, leading to jumpiness, startled responses and vigilance about safety. These feelings may be particularly strong for individuals who are still working through the grieving process.
- ▶ **Frustration, Anger and Guilt:** The remembrance may reawaken frustration and anger about the disaster or traumatic event. Survivors may be reminded of the possessions, homes or loved ones they lost; the time taken away from their lives; the frustrations with bureaucratic aspects of the recovery process; and the slow process of rebuilding and healing. Individuals may also experience guilt about survival. These feelings may be particularly strong for individuals who have not fully recovered financially and emotionally.
- ▶ **Avoidance:** Some survivors try to protect themselves from experiencing a reaction

by avoiding reminders of the event and attempting to treat the remembrance as just an ordinary day. Even for these people, it can be helpful to learn about the common reactions that they or their loved ones may encounter so that they are not surprised if those reactions occur.

- ▶ **Remembrance:** Many survivors welcome the cleansing tears, commemoration and fellowship that the remembrance of the event offers. They see it as a time to honor the memory of what they have lost. They might light a candle, share favorite memories and stories or attend a worship service.
- ▶ **Reflection:** The reflection brought about by the remembrance of a disaster or traumatic event is often a turning point in the recovery process. It is an opportunity for people to look back over the past year, recognize how far they have come and give themselves credit for the challenges they surmounted. It is a time for survivors to look inward; recognize and appreciate the courage, stamina, endurance and resourcefulness that they and their loved ones showed during the recovery process; and pause to appreciate the family members, friends and others who supported them through their own healing process. It is also a time when most people can look forward with a renewed sense of hope and purpose.

Although these thoughts, feelings and reactions can be very upsetting, it helps to understand that it is normal to have strong reactions to a disaster or traumatic event and its devastation many months later. Recovery from a disaster or traumatic event takes time, and it requires rebuilding physically, emotionally and spiritually on many levels. However, with patience, understanding and support from family members and friends, survivors can emerge from a disaster or traumatic event stronger than before.

## Know How to Find Help:

If you or someone you care about needs help, you should contact your healthcare provider to get connected with trained and caring professionals.

Anyone experiencing psychological distress as a result of a natural or human-caused disaster can call the Office of Behavioral Health Crisis Helpline at (866) 310-7977 to receive free crisis counseling and help with stress management.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration also offers a toll-free, disaster distress helpline that operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This free, confidential and multilingual crisis support service is available via telephone at (800) 985-5990 and by texting 'TalkWithUs' to 66746.

Anyone considering suicide should call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-TALK (8255).

