

Mental health experts offer coping tips for well-being after storms and other disasters

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From left, Patrick Bordnick, dean of the Tulane School of Social Work; Tonya Hansel, director of the Doctorate of Social Work program; and Reggie Ferreira, director of the Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy, say self-care is key in dealing with the mental health challenges of Hurricane Ida.

Loss, uncertainty and stress weigh heavily on individuals who have been affected by disasters like named storms and wildfires. Mix these events with over a year and a half of dealing with a pandemic, and mental health concerns are completely

expected. Disaster mental health experts from the Tulane University School of Social Work offer explanations for what people are experiencing and how they can best look after their well-being in the aftermath.

“I have heard many people say, ‘I can’t handle one more thing,’” said Tonya Hansel, director of Tulane’s Doctorate of Social Work program. “Yet, here we are dealing with another big thing — hurricane recovery in the midst of a pandemic.”

Reggie Ferreira, director of the [Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy](#), listed a number of ways these events are tough on people’s lives even without COVID-19.

“Disasters bring unpredictability, and things change very quickly. They disrupt our daily routines,” Ferreira said. “People experience loss — loss of community, personal belongings and physical environment. And, these events can be life-threatening, which creates additional anxiety during and after the event.”

In these times of change, loss and anxiety, looking after one’s mental health can seem daunting, but everyone can benefit from making time for self-care, accessing resources and watching for warning signs that more support is needed.

Make Time for Self-Care

After the initial hurricane response to ensure personal safety and basic needs, focusing on well-being and stress reduction techniques is critical. “This does not have to be a huge investment and should not add more stress,” Hansel said. “Something as simple as allowing yourself time for a cup of coffee, deep breathing or taking time for rest are all good ways to work self-care into your routine.”

Tulane’s School of Social Work has a [robust website of curated self-care resources](#). Dean Patrick Bordnick’s self-care routine includes running and mindfulness. “Physical activity has been shown to reduce anxiety. So, taking 30 minutes for a brisk walk, yoga, or any favorite exercise can be helpful to your well-being,” Bordnick said. “Practicing mindfulness can also help when you feel overwhelmed. The idea here is that it centers you to the present and aware of the moment.”

Mindfulness comes in many forms, including guided meditation like the [weekly sessions the school is providing for members of the Tulane community](#), or it can be a simple grounding exercise. “One example of mindfulness is drawing attention to the five senses and listing: Five things you see, four things you feel, three things you

hear, two things you smell, and one thing you taste,” Hansel said. “This can help quiet thoughts and ‘what-ifs’ when it appears that we have quite a bit more of unpredictability.”

Ferreira agrees that self-care is a tool for increasing resilience. “When we are anxious or stressed, we can access a variety of simple coping strategies to help us alleviate that,” he said. “Getting back into a routine, practicing gratitude, journaling, staying hydrated, limiting exposure to news and visuals of the event, and so many other small practices can add up to well-being. We’ve experienced a shock on our system. What is most important is to be kind to yourself and others. We are all in this together.”

Access Resources

Reaching out to help or to ask for help are also important components of disaster mental health. “Several people have experienced multiple disasters during the past decades, so we have lessons learned from these events to fall back on,” Ferreira said. “We know that having strong personal support networks is helpful. This can be family, friends, neighbors, colleagues and spiritual connections. Check-ins with others can help reduce isolation and rebuild that lost sense of community.”

Some may find that they have a desire to help in a disaster’s aftermath. Once personal needs have been looked after, donating time, goods or money not only increases the available resources but also provides a self-care activity. [A number of resources from federal, state and local governments as well as nonprofit, faith-based and mutual aid organizations](#) are available, and mental health-related options for Louisiana and beyond are listed below.

Watch for Warning Signs

No one should ignore any major distress they are experiencing. “A certain amount of stress is necessary during disasters. It helps keep us safe and mindful of our actions,” Hansel said. “However, if one gets to the point where they cannot find even momentary relief from their anxiety or despair, then it is a good sign to reach out to a professional or hotline.”

Ferreira offered additional warning signs that indicate reaching out for professional assistance should become a priority. “Disrupted sleep, significant change in regular behavior, irritability, frustration, mood swings, forgetfulness, despair, guilt, fatigue,

substance use, interpersonal violence, and talk of self-harm should all be taken seriously,” he said.

Here are resources for someone in crisis:

- Disaster Distress Helpline: 800-985-5990
- Louisiana Spirit Counseling Line: 866-310-7977
- Louisiana Crisis Text Line: Text REACHOUT to 741741
- City of New Orleans Metropolitan Crisis Response Team: 504-826-2675
- Jefferson Parish 24/7 crisis line: 504-832-5123.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-TALK (8255)
- SAMHSA’s National Helpline for mental and/or substance use disorders: 800-662-HELP (4357)
- Domestic Violence National Hotline: 800-799-7233
- Trevor Project - LGBTQ Lifeline: 866-488-7386
- RAINN Sexual Assault Hotline: 800-656-HOPE (4673)

And here are few other options for local mental health resources:

- For general resources in the city: Call 311 or visit <https://vialink.org/resource-database/>
- Metropolitan Human Services District serves Orleans, Plaquemines, and St. Bernard parishes. Visit their website: <http://www.mhsdla.org/> or call (504) 568-3130 for more information about their services.
- Jefferson Parish Human Services Authority serves Jefferson Parish. Visit their website at <http://www.jphsa.org/> or call (504) 349-8833 for more information about their services.
- Louisiana substance abuse recovery by parish: <https://ldh.la.gov/index.cfm/page/1429>
- NAMI NOLA: <https://namineworleans.org/crisis-info/>

For members of the Tulane community:

- Students: Counseling Center 504-314-2277. And, for after-hours crisis support, The Line is available 24/7 to Tulane students at (504) 264-6074. <https://campushealth.tulane.edu/counseling-center>
- Faculty & Staff: New Directions professionals at 800-624-5544, or visit the website at <https://www.ndbh.com/>, company code: Tulane.

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Reggie Ferreira, director of Tulane's Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy