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Seek counseling for post-disaster depression

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Hurricane Rita came into my home via the Weather Channel. Luckier than those on the Gulf Coast, I still felt a rush of alarm, anxiety and dread. After recently watching Katrina devastate the South, Rita's potential terrified me.

Twice now, we've watched in agony as violent hurricanes approached the Gulf states. With nothing to do but wait, we anxiously hoped and prayed the storms would weaken, have some mercy or just plain disappear.

Hurricane season runs from June until November, so we still have a few months before the threat wanes. Feeling worried or sad about past and future hurricanes is a normal human response. However, persistent feelings of emptiness, difficulty concentrating, increased irritability, and sleep changes may be signs of a larger problem.

The National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) researched human behavior after events like the Oklahoma City Bombing, 9/11, the Iraq war and other natural disasters. The studies indicated that some people experience depression and severe anxiety in the wake of major



tragedies like Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The NIMH website states, "Reactions may include combinations of hopelessness, helplessness, depression, sleeplessness, anxiousness, physical pain, confusion, fear, anger, grief, shock, guilt, mistrust of others, and loss of confidence in self or others."

UM-St. Louis students might or might not have been directly affected by the hurricanes. Regardless of their proximity to the disasters, students could react negatively to the devastation.

If you exhibit some of the symptoms mentioned, please consider visiting the University Counseling Services office at 126 MSC. As the Counseling Services website, www.umsl.edu/counser, emphasizes, counselors won't judge or tell you what to do. Rather, they will guide you in coping with the burden you're carrying.

If you think a friend or family member is suffering from post-tragedy anxiety or depression, you might suggest they talk to a professional. The NIMH advises listening to those affected by the disaster and letting individuals express their emotions without judging them. Transversely, don't force a person to share his or her feelings, and avoid telling people how they "should" feel.

Reactions that last longer than a month may be indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder. While PTSD is relatively rare, it is a serious condition that warrants professional attention.

Pay attention to your feelings and those of others during the hurricane aftermath. Don't feel ashamed about seeking help, and don't be shy about discussing these issues with others. Our nation has experienced several severe tragedies recently. We have serious physical and mental rebuilding to do, and we can't fully recover without support.

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