Floods

Floods are one of the most common hazards in the United States. They occur when land that is normally dry experiences an overflow of water. Several events cause floods, including hurricanes and tropical storms, failed dams or levees, and flash floods that occur within a few minutes or hours of excessive rainfall.

Although coastal areas are more vulnerable to floods, particularly during hurricane season, they can occur anywhere and can vary in size and duration. Even very small streams, gullies, and creeks that may appear harmless in dry weather can flood.

The physical destruction of a flood can vary, with some carrying away everything in their paths, including houses, bridges, cars, and even people who may be trapped or wading in water. Further, the economic loss from hazardous flood conditions can be significant.

It's normal for people to experience emotional distress during a flood. Simply anticipating the possibility of what could be lost or destroyed during a flood can cause people to experience overwhelming anxiety or lose sleep. Other signs of emotional distress related to floods include

1. Feeling helpless or hopeless
2. Fearing that forecasted storms may develop into a hurricane, even when the chances they will are low
3. Constant yelling or fighting with family and friends
4. Excessive absences from work or school
5. Having thoughts and memories related to the flood that you can't get out of your head

Who is at risk for emotional distress?

People at risk for emotional distress due to the effects of floods include the following:

1. **Flood survivors**—People living in impacted areas, particularly children and teens, previously exposed to traumatic, life-threatening situations during a flood, are at risk. These people may also have once been displaced.
2. **Friends and loved ones**—It's normal for friends and family members located outside the impacted area to feel anxious about people who are in direct proximity to a flood.
3. **First responders and recovery workers**—These individuals may experience prolonged separation from loved ones (depending on the severity of the flood) and show signs of mental fatigue.

Once warnings for floods are issued, the risk for distress becomes greater. It's normal to feel unprepared, overwhelmed, or confused, particularly if you are not at home. You may also feel isolated due to telephone or electric power outages, or if you are separated from friends or family members.

Returning to a home, business, school, or place of worship impacted by a flood may cause additional distress, especially if there is structural damage. A temporary or permanent loss of employment may also occur.

Remember, too, that the anniversary of a disaster or tragic event can renew feelings of fear, anxiety, and sadness in disaster survivors. Certain sounds, such as streaming water or sirens, can also trigger emotional distress. These and other environmental sensations can take people right back to the event or cause them to fear that it's about to happen again. These *trigger events* can happen at any time.

People can experience a wide range of emotions before and after a disaster or traumatic event. There's no right or wrong way to feel. However, it's important to find healthy ways to cope when these events happen.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (Updated 2023, June 9). *Types of disasters: Floods*. Retrieved February 6, 2024, from https://www.samhsa.gov

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