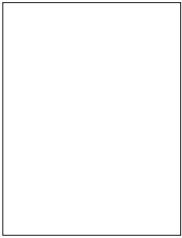


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Finding a New Normal: Helping Adolescents Cope After Natural Disasters

Editor’s Note: The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, NEHA features this column on environmental health services from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in every issue of the Journal.

In these columns, authors from CDC’s Water, Food, and Environmental Health Services Branch, as well as guest authors, will share insights and information about environmental health programs, trends, issues, and resources. The conclusions in these columns are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of CDC.

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adolescents in grades 3–12 reported symptoms of clinically significant post-traumatic stress disorder (Orengo-Aguayo et al., 2019).

During summer 2017, the U.S. and its territories were struck by three major hurricanes—Harvey, Irma, and Maria—within the span of one month. The damage caused by these storms was devastating, leaving widespread flooding, power outages, and interruptions to everyday life for millions of people.

The mental health impact of these storms was severe. By late 2017 and early 2018, media outlets reported increased suicide rates and mental illness in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria (Acevedo, 2018; Campbell, 2018; Dickerson, 2017b). A 2-tal health impact study of school students in Puerto Rico administered 5–9 months after Hurricane Maria made landfall showed that 7.2% of children and

Stress Following Natural Disasters Can Affect the Mental Health of Adolescents


Distress caused by natural disasters can cause emotional, mental, and physical problems. It can affect a person’s ability to think clearly, making it harder for them to process information and, in turn, follow health and safety guidance (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, 2019a). On an emotional level, distress can lead to a person feeling fearful, angry, sad, worried, numb, or frustrated. It can affect their sleep, appetite, and energy levels. Distress can even worsen chronic health problems and cause headaches, body pains, stomach issues, and skin rashes (CDC, 2019b).

For children and adolescents (ages 11–19), these reactions can be heightened by the physical, mental, emotional, and social changes that normally occur at this stage of development. In response to trauma, adolescents might act out, argue with their families, and spend less time with friends. They might also find it harder to express their feelings or really understand what is bothering them; they might claim to be fine when they are not, stay silent, or complain of physical pains or aches (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013).

Mental health is already a growing concern among our nation’s youth. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2020a), more than 1 in 3 high school students in 2019 experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, 40% higher than in 2009. Rates of suicide are also on the rise for adolescents—in 2019, approximately 1 in 6 reported making a suicide plan in the past year. Because adolescents are already vulnerable to poor mental health, it is important that we address their unique needs by providing the resources they need after a natural disaster. By doing so, they might be better able to manage their feelings and make healthier decisions.

Healthy Coping Strategies Can Help Adolescents Find Resilience and Hope During Difficult Times

In late 2020, CDC launched a new website (www.cdc.gov/disasters/teens.html) to help adolescents who are dealing with the aftermath of a natural disaster. The site features a video series, Finding a New Normal: Life After a Natural Disaster, that highlights the expe-



rience of four youths who have experienced different natural disasters, including hurricanes and wild res. They share their stories and advice to help others better cope after natural disasters.

In one of the videos, Mariana, an adolescent who dealt with the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, talks about the importance of staying connected to loved ones. Stay close to the people that love you and help each other get through this dif cult time. Always share and help people and try not to take anything for granted, Mariana said in

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