



UA students learn coping skills, storm preparedness in year following tornado

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By

TUSCALOOSA, Alabama -- As the University of Alabama community continues to assist with storm recovery in Tuscaloosa, the psychological well-being of students in the aftermath of the storm and disaster preparedness have also become important issues on campus.

Project Rebound UA, a university program that is part of a statewide crisis counseling initiative funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, is addressing both in its last months of its \$536,000 grant.

The outreach program, staffed with 20 graduate student counselors, began connecting with students in November to determine the need for aid including community services and mental health assistance.

Melanie Tucker, Project Rebound UA director and assistant professor in the Institute for Rural Health Research and the College of Community Health Sciences, said more students have approached them around the one-year anniversary of the April 27 tornado.

"What we're seeing more of now that the anniversary's coming up -- people are coming to us and they're just wanting to talk, to tell their story or share what they're doing right now," Tucker said.

With this week falling during finals, already a period of increased anxiety on campus, some students still are in disbelief while others are just beginning to understand the magnitude of how close they came to the storm, Tucker said.



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Bus loads of UA students arrived early to assist in cleaning the Forest Lake area in Tuscaloosa, Ala. on April 21, 2012. (Ben Flanagan / al.com)

"It's expected around the anniversary that people are going through some sadness, maybe they lost family members, friends, pets or possessions," Tucker said. "There is some sadness and almost disbelief that it happened, or maybe they can't believe that it was a year ago that this happened."

A recent study led by UA psychology professor Rosanna Guadagno investigating the link between students' social media use and psychological well-being following the tornado has found that female students are returning to normal faster than their male counterparts.

"We're not sure why the men aren't bouncing back yet, and it may have something to do with the fact that women use the Internet more to reach out to people," Guadagno said.

Tucker said that more women have participated in Project Rebound UA's individual sessions and are generally more willing to talk to counselors, which can help in sorting out issues.

The long-term psychological effects of the storm will differ for each impacted student depending on their experience and their coping skills, Tucker said, and severe weather may be a continuing source of anxiety for some.

"I would say their outlook and prognosis is very good, as long as they maintain good coping skills," Tucker said.

Tucker said students should set a routine, eat healthy, get enough sleep, maintain social contact with family and friends and talk to someone if issues do come up.

In its last months, Project Rebound UA also been asked by faculty to talk to students about tornado preparedness. Students have been encouraged to sign up for UA Alerts, a notification system that can send updates on emergency information to students and university employees via phone, text message and email. Tucker also tells students to identify a safe place and to have access to a weather radio.



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UA students Zac McMillian of Memphis, Christopher Simpson of Port Charlotte, Florida, Paige Bussanich of Muscle Shoals, Taylor Surprenant of Naples, Florida and Katie DeLost of Gainesville, Virginia volunteer at the UA Community Service Center's Ripple Effect: Freshman Volunteer Day off of Elm Drive in Holt, Ala. on Aug. 23, 2011. (Chris Pow / al.com)

"One thing we're trying to impress upon students and even our faculty and staff is that when bad weather comes, don't depend on the sirens," Tucker said. "And I think that's one thing James Spann would be really proud of us for. Go to your alerts,

watch the weather, just get connected."

Jason Senkbeil, assistant professor of geography at UA, has been studying tornado preparedness and the decisions made by people in the face of severe weather. He said UA students, as well as people across Alabama, have begun to think more about how they react to severe weather threats.

"I think the change in students' awareness is the same as it's changed for everybody in this state," Senkbeil said. "I think that because of what happened last year, people are paying much closer attention to the wording of the warnings. I think people are trying to understand, 'OK, we have severe weather tomorrow, how does this compare to previous events?'"

Senkbeil, who will present some of his findings at a **tornado research symposium at UA today**, said several graduate students are doing research on topics related to tornado preparedness and recovery, including work on shelter adequacy and on false alarms and near misses.

Project Rebound UA will end on May 31, but efforts to get out information via the program's social media accounts could continue. Tucker said that with an infrastructure in place, the program could resume quickly in the aftermath of a similar disaster.

Student volunteer efforts in the past year have been impressive considering the impact of the storm on their own lives, Tucker said.

"I'm just amazed at what the students have done, how they've bonded together and started working in the community and helping with recovery," Tucker said. "I think they're just phenomenal."

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