



Alabama tornadoes: As many scrambled to get back to normal, counseling wasn't always on 'to do' list

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By **Hannah Wolfson -- The Birmingham News**



Project Rebound team member Martell Hall, right, hugs David Spanick after a visit in May 2011. For the past year, the FEMA-funded program has helped victims of last April's tornadoes cope with the aftermath. (The Birmingham News/Joe Songer)

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- How do we feel?

A year after tornadoes devastated the state, that's what mental health professionals want to know. As the piles of debris shrink and houses are rebuilt, how well are residents — both those hit hard by the storms and those who watched from safety — handling the emotional wreckage left by the events of April 27, 2011?

Overall, pretty well, say psychologists, counselors and other mental health workers. But many are still suffering, and there's some worry they may go unhelped as the storms recede into the past.

"In any disaster, there are more psychological wounds than there are physical," said Josh Klapow, a psychologist and professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Although almost a year has passed, many victims may have been so busy with basic survival that they haven't had the time or energy to take care of their mental health. Take Pam Burrell, whose Tuscaloosa home was destroyed by falling trees last April 27 while she shielded her 9-year-old daughter and 5-year-old niece in a hallway.

"I haven't had any counseling because I've been constantly busy trying to work and get things back to normal," said Burrell. "But I catch myself sometimes thinking about it. My mind will go there to that day and thinking of other people who got hurt and lost their lives and we're still able to be here."

Burrell's experience is pretty common, said Lisa Turley, state director for **Project Rebound**, a federally funded program that trains people to counsel disaster survivors. For close to a year, 105 workers have scoured the state, going door to door in storm-stricken neighborhoods and setting up tables at football games and local Wal-Marts.

So far, they've encountered more than 130,000 people, and 26,765 of them got one-to-one counseling. Of those, 1,859 were referred to a psychologist or some other kind of mental health service and 161 were referred to substance abuse counseling.

Turley said there are no rules for who has coped well and who hasn't. Many people who were hit hard found inner strength or community support, while others who sustained no damage may still be depressed or anxious — and feel survivor guilt to boot. But all pain is pain, she said.

"It impacted every one of us, whether we watched on television safe and secure in our home or we were worried about our children in Tuscaloosa," Turley said. "We were all emotionally impacted by these storms."

First aid for the psyche

Klapow estimates that as many as 70 percent of all residents of the Birmingham area felt some stress, anxiety or grief immediately following the storms, but that has faded over the past year.

"People are resilient, and most people will sort of muddle their way through this and get back on their feet," Klapow said.

The process can be sped up by what he calls "psychological first aid." He uses this analogy: If you cut your leg during the storm, you may be able to hobble along, and eventually heal, without professional help. But if you do get some kind of aid, the wound will heal faster and scar less.

Much of the help, he and others said, comes from providing for victims' practical needs — a warm blanket, a plate of food, help finding a tree removal company — and listening.

"What people don't realize is that it is an effective tool," Klapow said. "A lot of people come up on family and friends and it's that awkward moment: What do I do? What do I say? If I just give you a cup of coffee and listen, that might help a little bit."

Although there was plenty of support in the days and weeks immediately after the storm, that may be harder to find as we pass the year mark, said Jacqueline Dillon DeMarco, a psychologist in private practice in Mountain Brook who has studied trauma.

She and others said that if someone's still experiencing signs of trauma — such as insomnia, anxiety or depression that interfere with daily life — it's probably time to seek professional help. At the very least, she said, just reach out to somebody who will listen.

"If I was to give advice, it would be to talk to someone, even if it's just a friend," she said. "Or if you have a loved one who went through the tornadoes or something else traumatic, call them up and ask them how they're doing. Just because they seem to have it together doesn't mean that emotionally they're OK."

Even those who are feeling fine may see a surge of symptoms brought on by storm sirens and panicky weather forecasts. That's to be expected, counselors say, unless, again, it impedes people's ability to work or function. It's especially expected in children, so adults should stay calm and seem in control, even if they don't feel like it.

Turley says tornado season may turn out to be a "trigger event" for a lot of people.

"When we've got bad weather coming, that's going to bring things up for people and they're going to start ruminating about what they went through and they need to talk about it again," she said. "Let them talk. It's really a matter of saying, 'I can't imagine what you went through, but look at where you are now.'"

One way to weather the ups and downs is finding a way to focus on the good things, not the bad. That's why Mary Ellen Capps, a licensed professional counselor in Homewood, and others have been working through **Camp Storm Alabama** to help children create gratitude journals. They've also made flags to show what they're grateful for, which will be on display at this weekend's Magic City Art Connection.

"We've heard things like, 'I'm grateful I'm alive and my family's alive,' or 'I'm grateful they found my puppy; he was missing,' or 'I'm grateful I got a new house,'" Capps said. "The idea is that bad things happen in this world, but even out of the worst things, something good can happen."

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