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## One-year tornado anniversary hits some Alabama residents harder than they imagined

**Counselor: ‘People have been very emotional, very sentimental’**

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— On paper, everyone knew the anniversary was coming.

But Tuscaloosa, Ala., resident Clay Leak said Friday’s one-year anniversary of the April 27, 2011, tornado was a more emotional experience than he and many other people expected.

He thinks the same could be the case May 22 in Joplin.

“I think it had a larger impact than people imagined,” said Leak. “It’s shocking how much it affected people the day of and the night before. It’s having a bigger impact than people thought it would.”

Tuscaloosa’s EF-4 tornado killed 53 people in the city and was part of a larger outbreak of tornadoes throughout the South that left hundreds dead. The Alabama Capitol Building on Friday was decorated with 253 flags to honor those who died in the state last year.

Leak is a team leader with Project Rebound in Tuscaloosa, which provides crisis counseling for tornado victims.

“People have been very emotional, very sentimental about it,” he said Friday, on the day of the anniversary.

There has been a feeling of “‘Oh my God’ and you relive that whole day,” Leak said, but the goal should be to focus not just on what happened on April 27 — or May 22 in Joplin’s case — but what also happened in the year that followed.

“The other 364 days we remember the good things,” he said. “The main feeling is that while I remember the destruction I also think about the friends, families and strangers who just showed up (to help).

“You don’t forget the bad stuff ... remember the good stuff,” was his advice.

The city of Tuscaloosa began commemorating the anniversary of its tornado with events last Saturday, culminating in a community service Friday at the University of Alabama in which many of the families of the victims were present.

“It is so important to this community on so many levels,” Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox said of the anniversary events.

But he, too, was not prepared for the depth of emotion as the anniversary approached.

“It’s hitting all of us,” he said Friday.

Doug Keys, an elder at University Church of Christ in Tuscaloosa, said they held a ceremony on Thursday night, the eve of the 1-year anniversary. It involved 12 other churches, a community choir and a speech by the mayor. Hundreds of people turned out.

“For those who were here, it was a moving event,” said Keys.

“It was such a horrific event, I think you need to remember,” he said of the anniversary.

But it also is important to recall how the community pulled together, and the support that came in from around the country and even around the world.

“We are looking for a brighter day, but we don’t forget those who lost their lives and those who may still be grieving,” he said. “There is remembrance and reflection, but there is also hope for tomorrow. That’s what people are looking for. We all need that hope. That is what all these events are about.”

Jeff Hamilton, professor of psychology at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, said there are psychological and non-psychological reasons for stopping to remember traumatic events.

“People would not so consistently do these things in the wake of a tragedy if there were not some psychological benefit,” he said.

Non-psychological benefits include using the anniversary as a reminder to check up and see how everyone is doing, and to find out if victims still need help, and then to organize more volunteers and donations if necessary.

Psychologically, anniversary commemorations give people an opportunity to recall the events in a way that allows them to exert some control over an otherwise traumatic experience, Hamilton said, and it also allows them to integrate those memories with more positive events of the past year.

“Instead of being part of a 15-minute or one-hour event, they become integrated into a yearlong event,” he said of the memories.

And that yearlong event not only includes the tornado itself, but also memories of neighbors helping neighbors, the unexpected assistance of strangers, new relationships that were formed after the storm, and more, he said.

And all of that, Hamilton said, helps reduce the impact of the original trauma. The danger of trying to keep memories of the event repressed is that doing so actually can increase the potency and intensity of the emotions.

## Coping

Jeff Hamilton, professor of psychology at the University of Alabama, said that while anniversary commemorations are good things, not everyone wants to join, and people need to respect a person's reasons for not participating "and just respect people's way of coping."