

Experts: Tornado victims should re-establish routines

By Mary Sell Montgomery Bureau | Posted: Thursday, May 1, 2014 11:04 pm

MONTGOMERY — Many north Alabamians will be dealing with the aftermath of this week's severe weather for weeks and months to come, and as they work to rebuild and take care of their families, they also need to care for themselves, mental health officials stress.

"Allow yourself time to mourn your loss," said Leslie Phillips, of the Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama, which serves Limestone, Lawrence and Morgan counties.

She said people impacted by the tornadoes need to be patient with themselves.

"Some common reactions would include feelings of insecurity, anxiety, fear and anger, and of course, the unfairness of losing everything, especially when you see homes that weren't touched, and worries about the future," Phillips said.

Not addressing those feelings or the emotional stress of the cleanup process can lead to problems sleeping, trouble focusing at work and even aggression, she said.

Disaster survivors often feel physically and mentally drained; have trouble making decisions; are easily frustrated and may argue more with family and friends, according to the American Red Cross.

Experts advise there are a variety of ways to ease their stress, including staying connected with friends and family to receive their support, and setting priorities in small steps.

"It is important to establish a routine, even if it's just eating meals at a normal time," Phillips said.

"Getting back into some type of normalcy is important."

Routines are even more important for children dealing with post-tornado trauma.

Jacqueline Ergle, principal at Phil Campbell Elementary in Franklin County, said one of the lessons her school learned three years ago is to let students express themselves.

A Phil Campbell teacher and two students were killed in the April 27, 2011, tornado. The school still offers counseling to students.

"We learned that we have to let children express their feelings," Ergle said. Some wanted to talk, she said, some drew pictures.

"When storms occur, our children are still fearful and we let them voice their concerns," Ergle said Thursday. "We assure them that we're here for them, and we're going to do everything we can for them."

Brian Davis, executive director at the Mental Health Center of Madison County, said in times of turmoil, people need to take care of their emotional health. Otherwise, they're more likely to have mental fatigue

later.

“For me, it is about long-term sustainability,” he said. “All of us can white-knuckle it for a day or a week. But what we see with traumatic stress events is that the stress is accumulative. It builds up over time, people tough it out and grind through a hard event, but if they don’t attend to their emotional needs, they’re going to hit a wall.”

He compared ignoring emotional needs in times of stress to ignoring a car’s gas tank because there is no time to fill up.

“You can only put off filling up your gas tank for so long, and then you’re going to have a bigger problem,” Davis said.

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After the disaster

The American Red Cross offers the following advice for helping children recover after natural disasters:

Encourage children to talk; listen to their concerns.

Calmly provide factual information about the disaster and plans for ensuring their ongoing safety.

Involve children in updating your family disaster plan and disaster supplies kit and practice your plan.

Involve children by giving them specific tasks to let them know they can help restore family and community life.

Spend extra time with children.

Re-establish daily routines for work, school, play, meals and rest.