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UA group sees increase in counseling requests a year after tornado

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TUSCALOOSA | Although it saw a lull in contacts earlier this year, a University of Alabama group that offers counseling to students who wish to talk about the April 27 tornado has seen a rise in interest as the anniversary of the storm draws near.

Project Rebound UA is part of the statewide Project Rebound effort, a crisis counselor program activated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency after natural disasters.

Funded with a \$536,000 grant, Project Rebound UA was established in November and offers students one-on-one, temporary counseling, said Melanie Tucker, Project Rebound UA director and assistant professor in the Institute for Rural Health Research and the College of Community Health Sciences' department of community and rural medicine.

According to a UA news release, 167 individual counseling encounters and 2,646 outreach encounters were recorded between Project Rebound UA's launch in November and the end of January.

Tucker said that in March, the group made about 300 different contacts.

"The tone of it has changed. In November, a lot of people were still wanting to talk. But then there was a bit of a lull in January and February," Tucker said. "I think the national championship helped get everyone's mind off of the tornado a bit.

"But now that the anniversary is coming up, we're really seeing more and more people who want to talk."

Tucker said the group expected that to happen, and planned accordingly.

"There's already a little more anxiety around this time of year since we're coming up on finals," she said. "The tornado is an event that really disrupted their lives. And with all of the memorials and other events going on right now, they're being reminded constantly of it."

Tucker said the majority of Project Rebound UA's contact with students is through tables set up at dorms, the Ferguson Center and the Student Recreation Center. Tucker said counselors hand out brochures and talk with anyone who wants to share.

"We tell them who we are and ask if they were here during the tornadoes, and that really opens up the door. A lot of students are really eager to share their story, whether it's where they were during the storm or how they helped with the recovery effort," she said.

Tucker said the sessions are generally brief but give the counselors, all of them UA graduate students trained by FEMA, time to assess the students and see if they're showing symptoms of anxiety or stress, such as sleep problems or appetite issues.

"We're just trying to get them back on track after they've experienced some type of

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trauma. If we feel like someone we talk to needs further, or more in-depth counseling, we refer them to the proper counselors,” Tucker said.

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Tucker said the counselors want students to know that their symptoms are normal responses after experiencing the trauma of a tornado.

“What I’ve heard and what my counselors report back are responses like ‘I’m fine, I was a half mile away,’” Tucker said. “But really, that’s minimizing the experience. If you said that to someone halfway across the country they would say, ‘You were only half a mile away?’

“It doesn’t matter if it’s something as small as a dream or a nightmare you have about the tornado, it’s still important to acknowledge what happened. We don’t want to encourage them to be traumatized, but thinking you’re OK and noticing increased irritability, nightmares, anxiety could point to something serious.”

In addition to face-to-face meetings, Project Rebound UA has also been communicating with students through its Twitter account, @Proj_ReboundUA, and through a text messaging hotline FEMA recently incorporated into the program.

“We’re pretty active on the Twitter account sending out tips and comments. One thing that we’ve noticed is when bad weather is expected, that Twitter account blows up,” Tucker said. “We’ve heard from so many students there telling us they’re nervous or anxious. For a lot of them, they reach out through the social networks or text messages because they’re not as comfortable reaching out face-to-face.”

Tucker said Project Rebound UA has been overwhelmed with response and support from the community as well as university faculty and staff. Moving forward, the group is focusing on educating students about knowing where their dorm’s safe place is during a storm. Tucker said the group is also educating students about the UA Alert system and teaching students to not depend on outdoor weather sirens for warning that a storm is approaching.

Tucker said Project Rebound UA will offer services through the end of May when its grant runs out.

Until then they will continue to set up tables around campus and can be reached on Twitter or by calling 205-348-0025.