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## Disasters can have long-term mental impact

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In the hours after the tornado hit on April 27, 2011, people were concerned about their immediate needs: food, shelter and locating their loved ones.

But in the weeks and months that followed, many started to feel the impact of the tornado on their emotional health. In some cases, it was months after the tornado hit before people reached out for help.

"We immediately began offering free counseling to people affected by the storm after the tornado hit," said Larry Deavers, executive director of Family Counseling Service in Tuscaloosa. "Over the course of the summer, we got a reasonable response to that service, but around September, the number of people coming in doubled, and it's remained high."

That is partly because it's human nature to focus on more immediate needs after a natural disaster like a tornado.

"When people were more free to step back and think about things, they realized they weren't sleeping well, eating the way they should, or had a shorter temper," Deavers said. "Often, stress that results from the tornadoes can show itself in relationship problems, marriage problems or problems within a family."

Common symptoms for people affected by a disaster include difficulty concentrating, feeling lost or tearful, difficulty sleeping, and feeling frustrated or irritable.

It's important that people

understand it's OK to feel that way. Such feelings are normal after a disaster, and leading up to the anniversary of a disaster, said Lisa Turley, state director for Project Rebound.

To reach out to people experiencing the emotional effects of the storm, the Alabama Department of Mental Health started Project Rebound in June in areas affected by the tornado, including Tuscaloosa County and much of West Alabama. Crisis counselors initially went into affected areas to visit door to door, meet with students and visit nursing homes to talk to people about the storm. During the past year, Project Rebound performed one-on-one counseling with more than 26,000 people statewide, including 2,703 people in West Alabama.

Rather than offering traditional psychiatric counseling, crisis counselors listened to people and provided the right contacts for people to receive resources, whether it was help with aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, help dealing with insurance companies or contact with a mental health professional for an ongoing medical need.

Project Rebound, funded through FEMA, is expected to continue through the end of June, although its scope has changed somewhat, Turley said. There are now 105 Project Rebound counselors — 22 in Tuscaloosa, Bibb and Pickens counties — trying to help people deal with the aftermath of the April 27 tornado.

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"We started at the beginning of March going out in teams and talking about the anniversary," Turley said. "We've made a huge effort in getting out and educating people that they may find some of the coverage and remember the tornado difficult."

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People who feel particularly upset about the tornado's anniversary may want to remember the disaster in their own quiet way, rather than watching the news coverage about the tornado anniversary or going to some of the public memorials that have been scheduled, she said.

People should also be careful about letting children watch too much coverage on the storms, Turley said.

"Talk with your child about what they are comfortable with," she said.

While most people have not been impacted in their day-to-day life by last year's tornadoes, it's normal to have a heightened sensitivity when it comes to serious weather in the following months and even years, said Jim Hamilton, associate professor of psychology at the University of Alabama.

About 4 to 6 percent of people impacted by natural disasters will continue to have more serious long-term effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder, Hamilton said. Symptoms of that disorder include flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, avoidance behavior and difficulty sleeping.

"If anxiousness comes and goes, it should get less and less as time goes on," Hamilton said. "But if the problem is getting in the way of normal life, you need to seek help."

Local meteorologist James Spann said he works to dispel people's fear about bad weather since people are still feeling the effects from last year's storm.

"There's no doubt about it. People were traumatized, and that doesn't go away in a year," he said. "I feel like a part of what I need to do now is walk through these things and hold their hand."

In general, people have a heightened sense of awareness following major storms, like the April 27 tornadoes, and that will last about three years, Spann said. That means people will pay more attention to weather broadcasts and take tornado warnings more seriously, which is a good thing, he said. But people also need to remember that the April 27 tornado outbreak was a rare event, he said.

"Last year's storm was generational," Spann said. "I won't see another storm like that in my lifetime — where there were 63 tornadoes like that in one day and 239 deaths."

In some cases, the stress of recovering from a natural disaster can lead to depression. While depressed feelings typically will pass, feelings that persist and start to interrupt daily life indicate that it is time to seek the help of a mental health professional, Hamilton said.

Project Rebound has a help line for people who may need to talk to someone about their experience. Professionals with the Project Rebound call line can then put the person in touch with a crisis counselor or other form of local help if needed. To reach Project Rebound, call 205-361-0359 or 800-639-7326.

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