

FOX NEWS

Katrina Takes Toll on Survivors' Mental Health

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GULFPORT, Miss. — Tom Leynes once was a carpenter, a popular man with an apartment just a block off the beach, "a happy guy."

Today Leynes lives in a fly-covered pup tent. He's bearded and haggard, each day wearing the same camouflage green shorts and thousand-yard stare. He's trying to fend off a deepening depression with cans of beer and Valium, and on some days the 49-year-old man is barely coherent.

But the sedatives and the passage of time are not helping. It's getting harder to sleep, harder to smile, harder not to cry at the memory of discovering the hand-in-hand corpses of two little girls.

"I'm losing my mind," he says.

It's been nearly a month since Hurricane Katrina wrecked the lives of thousands of people. But many of the storm's survivors are finding it harder to cope today than immediately after the storm.

"People are recognizing this isn't like a tornado where things will be rebuilt and life will get back. Life will not be the same. So there is a despair and a depression that is setting in," said Dr. Dorothy Dickson-Rishel, a psychologist at Memorial Hospital at Gulfport.

Dickson-Rishel said that in the past week, she and her colleagues have heard increasing reports of sleeplessness, anxiety and even domestic violence. "And these are not folks who have had trouble with violence or rage before," she says.

And then there are the tears. Many people, even those who seem in high spirits, begin to cry when asked about their daily routine, or their home, or relatives who were forced to shelter miles away.

Experts say it's the same phenomenon that's played out after terrorist attacks, house fires, car accidents and other traumatic events.

"As things subside a little and the immediate threat disappears, some of the processing of what actually happened occurs," said Dr. Israel Liberzon, a

University of Michigan psychiatrist who specializes in post-traumatic stress disorder.

Gone is the adrenaline rush that came with surviving the hurricane, and much of the esprit de corps that helped people deal with the primitive conditions immediately afterward. The adventure is over, but life has not returned to normal.

People who lost homes have now spent weeks living with friends or relatives, and it's getting to them. Even people who still have homes find themselves shaken by their inability to return to comfortable routines.

"You don't know where your friends are. The kids aren't in school. Even the way a lot of people drive to work is different," said Julie Bosley, a Waveland resident who commutes to work at Gulfport's Garden Park Medical Center.

"There are just so many changes."

Katrina's flooding forced Robert Bryant, 69, to swim for three hours inside his Gulfport house alongside a floating couch bearing four dogs. He said he's been able to avoid depression by working hard all day, every day, on cleaning up his properties.

But he said his wife, Michelle, who wasn't at home during the storm, recently buckled. "Flipped," Bryant said, explaining that she has had emotional problems in the past and went for psychiatric treatment last week.

That's not to say Gulf Coast therapists are being inundated with patients. Therapists say scheduled appointments are off. Admissions are down at Memorial Behavioral Health, the 81-bed Gulfport facility that is the largest inpatient psychiatric treatment center on the Mississippi coast.

Patients have been displaced by the storm or they are focused on day-to-day living, said Michael Zieman, the facility's administrator.

But other types of counseling are on the rise. Zieman said his center was called on by about a half-dozen businesses to offer counseling to workers. One new request just came in this week from Keesler Federal Credit Union. A third of the credit union's work force is homeless and anxiety has been mounting.

Volunteer counselors have descended on the Gulf Coast. Among them is Lynne LeHocky, a Holland, Mich., counselor who was part of a religious outreach effort in west Gulfport.

LeHocky has been visiting people. Not many ask for counseling help, but many seem to need it. "They're overwhelmed," she said.

Even the helpers have been losing their composure, at least fleetingly.

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Bryant's neighbor, John Mann, is known as an inspirational dynamo in west Gulfport. The 58-year-old handyman has been fixing up his house and rebuilding the homes of others.

"How do you like my view?" he called to a visitor Tuesday, alluding to how the storm pancaked two blocks of buildings that once stood between his home and a beachside vista.

But when asked if he ever gets down, Mann said yes, lately, when he thinks about his 11-year-old son, who is safe and living in a nearby community right now. "I choked up a little when I talked to my boy," Mann said, tears welling.

Dr. James Rusch, a Gulfport psychiatrist, also considers himself lucky. His home is intact and his family safe. But as he talked about his day-to-day life now, his eyes turned red and moist.

"It's as if you're carrying an extra 20 pounds on your shoulders," Rusch said. "The emotional fatigue has just worn everyone out."

Add to that the looming presence of Hurricane Rita. The storm seems bound for Texas, but updates this week had predicted it might hook east to touch Louisiana, perhaps even Mississippi. That's adding to the anxiety people already feel, Rusch noted. He alluded to a rumor on Wednesday that gasoline might be rationed because of the new hurricane. "You can see how frightened everyone was," Rusch said.

It's not clear what diagnosis should be attached to recent symptoms. For many people, the sleeplessness, anger and sudden weepiness is just a normal part of coping with the disruptions of a natural disaster. Those symptoms will soon ease, said Liberzon, the Michigan psychiatrist.

But if the symptoms persist into late October and beyond, it's possible some are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder — a psychiatric illness that can occur following a life-threatening event. It can be treated with medications and therapy, Liberzon said.

Tom Leynes may or may not fall into that group.

Katrina was traumatic to him. He survived but said he saw death all around him. One day he discovered two dead little girls, holding hands, and it devastated him.

"I just never will forget the look on their faces. If I'd had my gun, I'd have laid right across the top of them and went boom," he said.

But he refuses to leave the neighborhood. He sleeps on the ground in a tent in the yard of one of Bryant's homes, which is still intact. Red Cross volunteers bring meals. The Virginia Army National Guard has been delivering ice. World Hope International brings bug spray and water.

He got a Valium prescription from a doctor after the storm, which he said is the first medication he's ever taken for an emotional imbalance. Before the storm? "Just Busch (beer)," he said.

But he was OK then, and he hopes to be again.

"I'll get over it," he said.