

Persistent feelings of grief and loss



*Jo Ann
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FAMILY MATTERS

Dear Jo Ann,

I'm feeling so worn down, sleepless, sad. I notice that I'm isolating myself. I'm not returning calls from friends or family. Katrina charged through last month. I have damage, but it seems I can't begin to perform what is usually so easy for me. What do you think is going on?

Signed,
Patty

Dear Patty,

Katrina did more than physical harm to Miami. In her wake, she left people numb and having difficulty focusing. Hurricane empathy in Miami is huge. We remember Andrew. We want to do more than send money to the people of Louisiana and Mississippi. We re-experience our own pain each time we turn on the TV. But that's just a part of it.

Another reminder of recent feelings of helplessness is stirred by the anniversary of 9/11. Who among us does not have a visceral, cellular memory of our nation in torment? I scurried about frantically wanting to protect my children and friends from invisible danger never before computed by my brain. We ran out and bought gas masks for friends and family. We bought bio terrorism suits. We bought antibiotics. I attended a workshop at Baptist Hospital on the medical aspects of bio terrorism. We had family meetings giving out bio terrorism information. The family created contingency plans. We had more water and Clorox than a small fortress. Rather than be still, I wanted the sense of empowering myself to help my family and friends in the event of a terrorist attack on Miami. I needed to create some order to assuage my anguishing personal sense of threat and potential loss.

Katrina touches our still unhealed, somewhat faded memory of Andrew, 9/11 and, more recently, etched, vivid images of Tsunami devastation and loss. Compound this with images of war and men about to be beheaded. Each image lays on those before them. Our emotional brains are on overload.

Media brings world events up close and personal today. We come face to face with political and natural torments that threaten extinction as we view their victims and hear their stories, at least those who lived to tell.

We knew the faces and stories of the more than 3,000 people lost in 9/11.

We watched the heroism of the police and fire department on early salvage missions. We watched anguished families try to find victims,

anything; finally pieces of them. We saw the Thais, and their struggle to be reunited with swept away loved ones. We watched their gentle dignity and grief. We got to mourn with them personally. We watch with horror and outrage as our young soldiers are threatened each day or victims of war held hostage and killed. We learned that we are essentially helpless in the face of certain events.

Many of us have symptoms that will resolve naturally within weeks or months. If symptoms persist, you may be suffering from a disorder called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. Medline describes diagnostic criteria this way: "Post traumatic stress disorder may occur soon after a major trauma or can be delayed for more than six months after the event. When occurring soon after the trauma, it usually resolves within six months. PTSD can occur at any age and usually follows a disaster such as flood, fire (I place hurricanes in there) or events such as war, imprisonment, assault, domestic abuse or rape.

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 may have caused PTSD in those who were involved, people who witnessed the disaster and those who lost relatives and friends. We do not know why some people develop PTSD responses and others do not, but psychological, genetic, physical and social factors are involved. PTSD alters the body's response to stress by affecting stress hormones and neurotransmitters. Previous exposure to trauma may increase the risk, which suggests that this may be a learned response. Vietnam veterans who developed a strong support system were less likely to develop PTSD."

Patty, each of us reacts to stressful events differently depending on our biochemistry, tolerance for stress, and history. There are anticipated reactions to trauma. You are having some of the symptoms of avoidance. These include lack of interest in normal activities, numbing, feelings of detachment, reduced expression of moods and isolation. Try to help yourself by engaging in activities and being with loved ones. It's okay to be passive, just go along and allow others to help you right now. As your emotional strength returns, you will have opportunities help others. Should your depressed feelings and need to isolate persist beyond the next few months, you would benefit from a visit or two with a therapist informed in post-traumatic stress disorders and depression.

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