

**Health  
Management  
Partners, Inc.**

From The EAP -

Stress Management Before, During, and After A Hurricane Threat

Few things could be as stressful as leaving your home and waiting for days to find out if you even still have a home. For those who stay – a decision may have been made to go against what authorities recommend, and possibly be separated from family and loved one while waiting for the storm to come. This is also highly stressful. And after the experience with Hurricane Katrina three years ago everyone is well aware of how bad things can turn out both for those who evacuate and those who stay.

However, there are some things you can do to increase your emotional resiliency and manage the stress of these events better. Let this list inspire you to think of other things that will most help in your own unique situation.

Some of these ideas are for “Before”. If the most recent hurricane threat was highly stressful for you this is a good time to think about how to reduce stress next time. Hopefully it will be years before there is a “next time” but there probably will be another hurricane threat at some point. Invest a little time now while events are fresh in your mind and think about what could have gone better, as well as what worked out well.

**So, take a deep breath and think about the following:**

- **Think of the things that have helped you cope in other situations** – even if these situations were completely different. You will have the best success with managing stress in ways that have been successful for you in the past.
- **Remember that the weather is something that you cannot control.** There is nothing you can do to change the weather – so you might as well not waste time worrying about the worst case scenarios.
- **Put things into perspective.** Yes it’s bad to live with hurricane threats but if you lived somewhere else it could be earthquakes, fires, tornadoes, or snow storms. If the gulf coast is the place you live, hurricanes are definitely in the negative column. You will feel less stressed if you spend time thinking of the many, many things in the positive column rather than focusing on how bad a

hurricane threat is. Focus on the upsides of living in the gulf coast to put things in better perspective.

- **Remember that many others are in your same situation** – it is likely that people who are relying on you will understand that there is a disruption and forgive you if deadlines are missed, events cancelled, or other things not carried out with your normal level of efficiency. And if not – well you can only do what you can and further worry won't make things better.
- **Try to make your time while away (or stuck at home) as enjoyable as possible.** Spending excessive time watching the news or worrying will not improve the situation. You might as well sightsee, read a book, or rest – or engage in whatever other activity will take your mind off the situation. The odds are in your favor that nothing really bad will come to pass – and if it does trust that you will find the resources you need to recover.
- **Be patient with yourself and others.** Everyone is stressed and that leads to short fuses. The calmer and more patient you can be the more likely that others around you will remain calm so that everyone can think as clearly as possible. This is especially important when children are involved. Your being outwardly upset will only lead to your children being upset – and to more stress.
- **Be sure to explain what is happening clearly to children.** Children sometimes think that they have caused bad things to happen or that you are angry with them because of the tension and rapid activity. They may think that things are much worse than they are. Your reassurance is essential to their emotional resiliency. And reassuring others will calm you down as well.
- **If you have a faith or religious practice turn to it for strength and guidance.** Prayer can be a positive influence and stress reducer. Even if you are completely non-religious repeating positive affirmations can keep your mind from worry, and ease your stress.
- **Understand that some uncomfortable feelings are normal reactions to the abnormal events surrounding a hurricane.** It is normal to have short term changes to appetite or sleep patterns. It is also normal to feel out-of-sorts, fuzzy headed, angry, powerless, tearful, scared, discouraged, or anxious. Memory lapses are another normal reaction. These things almost always improve on their own within a few weeks. If you find you are having reactions that trouble you, or negative feelings that don't go away, the EAP can help. If you find yourself relying on negative coping mechanisms (like drinking or gambling) the EAP can help get you back in a positive direction. Remember that it is normal - not a personal weakness - to have negative feelings or reactions after a traumatic event.

- **As a part of this be sure to discuss any anger openly.** Sometimes anger over “if only” or “shoulda, coulda” causes big relationship problems at exactly the time when everyone needs support. If you carried out your plan as best you could, accept that you did all you could have done with the information you had at the time. There is no need for additional stress caused by guilt or second guessing.
- **Recognize that there is no such thing as a perfect situation during a hurricane threat.** Whether you stay or leave, there will be some disagreeable aspects. The grass sometimes looks greener somewhere else – but may not be. Focus on the positives of your chosen plan to keep yourself in the best mindset.
- **Self care is important in a time of high stress** – try to get some exercise (like a walk), to eat right, to get enough sleep, and to maintain rituals that are relaxing (like hot baths). It will be less difficult to manage stressful times if you recharge your own batteries. This isn’t selfish, it’s smart. On the other hand a time of stress is not the time to implement big life changes. For instance, this isn’t the time to try a restrictive new diet.
- **Be pro-active in letting your loved ones know that you care about them and appreciate them.** Reassurance of your mutual love and commitment is a great way to feel better and help others feel better. The more you can focus on your appreciation for others the less they will get on your nerves when you are hours in a car or cramped together in a hotel.
- **Be pro-active to let work colleagues know that you care about them and appreciate them.** They will feel better, and you will too.
- **Stay socially connected.** Keep in touch with others as much as possible and don’t isolate yourself. Maintaining a sense of community helps you feel supported and reduces stress.
- **Take things one day at a time** – sometimes even one hour at a time. You can handle almost anything if you don’t let it overwhelm you. Just keep moving in the right direction thinking only about the present. Don’t make big decisions if possible – wait until the situation has calmed down to quit your job, divorce your spouse, move to another state, give away all of your remaining possessions, or enter a convent.
- **Don’t “kick the cat”** – that is don’t find someone to take out anger on who doesn’t deserve it. Try to step back and identify your feelings and the true source before you let out anger in unproductive ways. And if you are the person who doesn’t deserve someone else’s anger try to have empathy for their situation and realize that their anger isn’t necessarily about you but is a reflection of being under stress. Don’t escalate the situation – step back and let things calm down before further discussion.

- **Accept that many things in your daily life will take more time and be a greater hassle right now.** If you lower your expectations you will lower your stress. Focus on the things you are grateful for to put the hassles into perspective.
- **Know that this too will pass.** Life will return to normal – even if it’s a different normal than before.

**And for next time, here are a few things to consider:**

- **Have a plan in place ahead of time and follow that plan knowing that it was made at time you weren’t stressed and were thinking more clearly.** When a storm is bearing down it’s not the time to be thinking about (or arguing about) what to do.
- **Accept that other adults will make their own decisions.** You may disagree with what others want and that’s ok. But you will experience less stress if you accept that the only person you can control is yourself. Make the best choice for yourself (and any minor children) even if others disagree and choose to do something else. This means that you may need to evacuate, leaving your spouse or others behind – or the reverse. The more this is discussed and planned for in advance, the easier it will be when the situation arises.
- **If you know that your family members and loved one will advocate a plan that is opposed to what you think is best discuss and agree upon this as far ahead as possible.** Don’t stress yourself by expecting that others will change to your way of thinking. Try to make alliances with others who think the way you do so you will have support, and possibly companions, if you choose to “go it alone”.
- **Try to have an open mind** – just because you always stayed, or always evacuated to your relatives doesn’t mean that you have to keep doing this. Consider alternatives, and remember that relationships matter. Sometimes minds are changed when people realize how their decisions affect others. This is especially helpful when discussing plans with elderly parents and relatives. Their strong instinct may be to stay in their homes for instance, but if they know how much worry that could cause you they may consider alternatives. A rational list of why your choice is the best will seldom change someone else’s mind, but knowing how you feel can make a difference, as can knowing the potential problems for others that can result from their decision.

- **Be as prepared as possible for carrying out your plan.** A checklist of what to take, a stock of necessary supplies, cash, fuel, a plan for where to go and when, and plans for communication will help reduce stress. You cannot prepare for everything so don't beat yourself up for what you "shoulda" done ahead of time. Just do what you can with what resources you have. You will know how to be better prepared next time.

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**You can call your EAP to speak with a mental health professional, an attorney, or a financial adviser. It's a benefit provided by your employer at no cost to you or your family.**

**The EAP is available 24/7 at (800) 256-1575 or (504) 832-1170 and at [www.EAPWEBSITE.com](http://www.EAPWEBSITE.com). Your company's name (or nick name) is your user ID.**