

Ask Dr. K®: Writings For Your Mental Health

PALM TREES AND HURRICANE STRESS

You might ask yourself, "Are his coconuts too loose? Thinking of a palm tree when forced to deal with the overwhelming stress of Hurricane Charley?"

But wait a minute. Palm trees are everywhere in Florida. They survive and carry on and this is what we are all trying to do right now.

[Editor's note: Now, years after Hurricane Charley, this information is still pertinent for any environmental crisis – and not just in Florida.]

Think of this: we all need to be like a palm tree in coping with our lives after a storm. In severe storms (the stress), the palm tree bends and is flexible in dealing with tremendously unfriendly forces (it adjusts to survive). It may drop foliage and a few coconuts ('lose it' a bit) but that is temporary. Usually, the palms roots go deep so there is no uprooting (falling apart.) If the palm does get uprooted because it was planted in an area where the roots could not go down too deeply (overwhelmed), it can be easily made upright, replanted and thrive again. Look around and see the number of palm trees that made it through the storm and it will be many.

Since Hurricane Charley, there have been a number of excellent articles about coping with the emotional fallout of this chaotic storm. An article in SUN newspaper's *Feeling Fit* section called *Stressed Out*, by Renee LePere covered many of the symptoms someone can encounter after this traumatic event. It also listed the different things a person could do to deal with the stress from the hurricane and the aftermath. I would like to address in a more general way the 'secrets' of getting through times that are stressful, be they daily events or the catastrophic experiences of a hurricane and its destruction.

Everybody deals with stress in his or her own way. Some people need to take a break and be alone for a while. Others need to move about more and be active. Some people need distractions; others need to increase their focus. In the early 1980's when "stress management" was very trendy, there were techniques like transcendental meditation, biofeedback and yoga promoted to get people to "slow down and smell the roses". To some degree, these ways of relaxing and focusing were helpful to many as a way of dealing with stress. But there were people who could not use these techniques. These people were initially considered too rebellious or unwilling to work with these programs, especially when they got worse as they tried to relax. They

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coped by keeping busy. They were described as “too controlling” or “driven”. What we finally learned was that it was not the particular technique one used to cope (relaxing or not). Rather, the absolute key to coping with stress in life is your *sense of control over what is happening to you*.

Undoubtedly, the most awful thing that can happen to a human being is to feel powerless or having lost control. This is what happens in traumatic events like hurricanes, rapes, kidnappings, bombings or severe harassment. In these situations, a human being feels utterly without power and this experience can cause quite a disruption in the mind. When you have been through such an experience, it is essential to re-establish some sense of control in your life again as soon as possible.

This does not mean absolute or total control or even 50% control necessarily. It means trying to exert in your life some sense of power through what you are doing. “You can’t keep control over everything in life,” you might say. “How do you control your life when it has changed dramatically? When a house is blown away? When the daily routine has disappeared? When all of my life has been changed?”

The answer lies in adding to the word “control” the other magic word, which is “resiliency.”

Resiliency means adaptability, flexibility, bending in the wind like the old palm tree. It is adapting to the present situation and trying to regain that sense of control. It is attempting to re-establish some sense of consistency or routine in your life to give yourself the feeling of getting back in control. These may be things as silly as cleaning something, organizing a box, cooking a meal or shining shoes. A guy might go out and wash his truck or car. Everyone felt human again when they were finally able to take a shower, wash up and put on clean clothes. In that simple, small way, it was a sense of control again. Resiliency came in when you might have had to adapt to only cold water for the shower or not having the clothes you wanted. It may be something like getting up at your usual time, giving yourself a plan for the day or taking the dog for a walk. All of these things, however simple, help to get us back into some sort of a routine. Routine or sameness or consistency, no matter how boring it may sound gives some predictability in our lives. Then we start feeling again, however, meager, the sense of control.

People looked at “getting organized” after the storm. This was also a way of feeling in control. Assessing damage, getting the insurance people, salvaging belongings, looking

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where to live and cleaning up were all necessary things to do, but also essential to feeling back in charge. We needed to be flexible, however, since insurance adjusters, roofers or contractors were not immediately available not to mention the lack of electricity, water or phones.

What to do:

- Recognize that you are going to be “out of sorts” for a while. Most times, as things get back to normal, we get back to normal.
- Keep in control as best you can
- Get back to doing routine things, no matter how minimal, as soon as possible--- walking, ironing, working, reading, watching TV, seeing friends, going to church.
- Mix with others. Talk about what has happened. Ask if anyone else is having bad dreams, can't sleep, is more nervous.
- Be flexible. Focus on getting things done but adjust to the 'after storm' mentality that 'things will get done when they get done'. But keep pushing.

What NOT to do:

- Watch out for excesses like increased drinking or spending money, excess. These types of behaviors give a false sense of control.
- Avoid anger. This is a very frustrating time and nerves are frayed. Anger saps you of your strength and only worsens stress. If something frustrates you, try to solve it—as best you can.
- Despair. If you are feeling overwhelmed and it is not going away, seek help.

Remember:

- You are not alone. Everyone has been affected.
- Listen to yourself. You know yourself best. Listen to your own counsel.
- Adapt
- Get back in control
- Seek solutions
- Things will get better

-Think of the palm tree