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## Katrina's Psychological Health Effects Will Be Long-Term, IWU Professor Says

September 9, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.- Beyond the obvious, urgent health issues facing Hurricane Katrina evacuees and relief workers, such a large-scale disaster will have both immediate and long-term psychological effects, says Cynthia Kerber, assistant professor of nursing at Illinois Wesleyan University.

"While there are a lot of issues regarding food and clothing and shelter for the people living in that area, there's going to be extensive psychological trauma that extends from (the tragedy), in those individuals, their families, their communities, even just people who hear about it on the news (and) feel so much concern," Kerber says. "And the volunteers. There's a lot of literature on relief worker stress, what they have to deal with years down the line because of the things they saw."

Kerber notes that not only have evacuees lost homes, jobs, and loved ones, in their uprooting they have lost mementos that are important links to their past, such as family photos and keepsakes.

"The devastation is so monumental, it's really hard to even grasp."

While health professionals who volunteer with the Red Cross and similar organizations are trained to deal with physical and psychological trauma, Kerber says ongoing assessments will be necessary to continually determine the issues victims are dealing with.

"A really good intervention for children and people through college age is to get them back in school somewhere. One, it creates a normal structure to their day; it helps them progress in their lives and their learning. It also places them in a setting where there's a lot of support and assessment. If there's a problem, (school personnel) can get them to additional treatment.

"For adults, if they could get any kind of temporary work, or re-establish in a new environment, that's going to help them feel like they're back to normal. Some relief efforts are helping displaced individuals get involved in a new community, but not nearly enough to meet the needs of those people."

People who take in evacuees will experience stress from the added members to their household, potentially for months to come. New research also points to vicarious stress among people with no tangible connection to a tragedy, who experience the emotional nature of the news coverage and knowledge that others are suffering, Kerber says.

Relief workers experience stress that is both immediate and delayed.

"When they come back (from their volunteer duty), they are exhausted and have to adjust to a slower pace of work. If you're working 17-, 18-hour days, barely taking time to eat and sleep and still not feeling like you're done ... then come back to people who had to pick up your job and family members you left, there's a lot of frustration and conflict. That's on the other end of the scale than people who don't know if their family members are alive or dead."

To discuss the psychological impact of Katrina with Kerber, contact Jeff Hanna or Ann Aubry at (309) 556-3181.



Cynthia Kerber

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