

One Year After the St. Louis Tornadoes Many Survivors Are Still Healing Emotionally

00;00;00;00 - 00;00;39;02

Bill Pollock

This is show me today the Voice of Missouri. As communities across the Saint Louis area continue recovering from last year's devastating tornadoes. This weekend also marks an emotional milestone for many families. A year later, survivors can still experience stress, anxiety, grief and other lingering effects from a disaster. Joining us is Beckie Geer, director of the Office of Disaster Services for the Missouri Department of Mental Health, to talk about what are known as anniversary reactions and how the Show Me Hope crisis counseling program is helping Missourians continue to heal.

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Bill Pollock

Beckie, thank you for joining us again. It's great to have you on the show. Thank you for having me again. This is the first time hearing of this term for those of us who haven't heard it. What are anniversary reactions after a disaster?

Beckie Gierer

It's a great question. So disaster anniversary reactions are some of those common reactions that we can have to the traumatic event, especially as that traumatic event approaches.

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Beckie Gierer

So it's common to experience emotional, behavioral, cognitive, or physical reactions that can really just be activated around around that anniversary of that event. So we see things like you mentioned, the anxiety, the fear, the grief. We can see a lot of different types of reactions that can occur when that anniversary approaches.

Bill Pollock

Why can emotions suddenly resurface around the one year mark, even for people who thought they were doing okay?

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Beckie Gierer

So this can occur because of the way that trauma is stored in our memory. So memories resurface that can hold information about the event and about the danger that happened around that event. Our brain helps protect us, which is great, and it helps us to be aware of when we are afraid and how to feel in various situations and how to think.

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Beckie Gierer

But sometimes it signals danger in a way that isn't always helpful, and it can become more intense leading up to or on the date the event happened, especially as there's an increase of things happening around us that can remind us of that day.

Bill Pollock

What are some things we should look for? Some common emotional or behavioral signs that people might notice in themselves, or maybe loved ones after experiencing a disaster?

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Beckie Gierer

It's important for us to just be aware of what that might look like for ourselves. And so there are common things that we may feel as we approach and move through that one year mark. We may have an increase in our memories or dreams or a feeling about the disaster event. Sometimes these memories can be extremely vivid.

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Beckie Gierer

They can make you feel like you're even reliving that event. We can see an increase in things like grief and sadness. As you think about what you experience, those losses that you had, you may have had a loss of income or a car or home or a job, valuables or a loved one. It's common to see an increase in fear and anxiety around this time, which can also lead to us feeling jumpy or even more startled easily.

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Beckie Gierer

And during this time, we can feel more frustrated or quicker to anger. So as we think back on to the losses that we experienced, we can start to feel just frustrated with that disaster recovery process and sometimes even with ourselves, because we're our own worst enemy, and that we

always think we should have moved on right? Or we should be further in that recovery process, which isn't usually the case.

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Beckie Gierer

We can feel guilty. It's common to see people start to distance themselves, or avoid or try to avoid those anniversary reactions by just not thinking about it. And then on the flip side of that, you can also see people starting to reflect back on how far they've come. Starting to embrace their feelings in order to remember what has happened and even honoring the memory of what they've lost.

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So a lot of different things that we can experience that are common and expected after, after. And as we move to the anniversary.

Bill Pollock

How do children and teenagers process these emotions? Are they different than adults? And then what should parents watch for?

Beckie Gierer

Absolutely. Kids of all ages process differently. And so they have different coping mechanisms. They don't always express their feelings like we do as adults.

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Beckie Gierer

They often show this through behavior changes or physical ailments, and sometimes even regression of certain types of behaviors or habits. So as adults, we've had to learn to cope with different adversities that kids don't really have the same experience with. So for parents, it's important to remember that when their children are expressing their emotions differently, that's oftentimes what we are seeing.

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Beckie Gierer

Parents can really help in those moments by validating their feelings, sitting down and talking with the kids to maybe clear up misunderstandings or the rumors or answer questions, or even just letting the kids vent to them about how they're feeling and their frustrations. Just like all those common reactions that I just mentioned. We know kids can experience that too.

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Beckie Gierer

So it's when things start to move beyond that, when they start moving into those risky behaviors that can pose a risk to safety, that we start to become concerned. So when kids or adults start turning to those substances or self-harming behaviors or other risks to themselves that we want to get them that immediate help. So those are the things I would tell parents to just caution them do it.

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Beckie Gierer

Pay attention to is when it moves beyond what we expect to see.

Bill Pollock

The one year anniversary of those devastating tornadoes in the Saint Louis area. And we're talking with Beckie Gierer, Director of the Office of Disaster Services for the Missouri Department of Mental Health. As we approach this anniversary, but tell us about the Show-Me Hope crisis counseling program and the kind of support it provides to survivors.

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Beckie Gierer

Yeah, it's one of my favorite programs. It is an outreach program, the Missouri Show-Me Hope CCP or crisis counseling program. It is an outreach program that we run after federally declared disasters, and it's designed to help individuals and communities during that disaster recovery process. So it's all about meeting people where they are. It's connecting them to resources, helping them build their coping skills and resilience, and really just kind of re instilling that hope.

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Beckie Gierer

So the crisis counseling program is designed to be strengths based. It's anonymous. It's confidential. It's free to anyone impacted by the disaster that's in Saint Louis City or Saint Louis County. The Show-Me Hope crisis counselors are out in the community assessing the emotional needs of the impacted individuals. They can make referrals for folks who need more of that traditional behavioral health services, if that is even something that they need. They can help them identify what needs that they do have and link them to community resources and disaster relief services, providing emotional support and education and all kinds of things they can do with individuals and community members that have been impacted

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Beckie Gierer

by this, so that we can continue to build that resilience and reinstall that hope, because we know this won't be the last time that something happens like this.

Bill Pollock

I know you said it's available to anyone. Does that include the people that maybe didn't suffer damage to their homes or physical property?

Beckie Gierer

Absolutely, yes. Anyone in the impacted community? It doesn't matter if you had a direct loss or, with physical damage to your home.

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Beckie Gierer

It doesn't matter because we know that people experience loss and grief differently. And so you absolutely may be experiencing a struggle or maybe experiencing emotions that are becoming overwhelming for an individual after or as we move through this anniversary. So it's important for them to know that they're not alone in this. There's a lot of people who feel this way during this time.

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Beckie Gierer

And when they do start to feel that overwhelming or, anxious or emotions that are becoming too much, they can try to focus on certain things that can help in those moments.

Bill Pollock

And Beckie, that Show-Me Hope. Crisis counseling program has kicked in and been working for a year. Any examples, success stories, that you could share?

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Beckie Gierer

Yeah. You know, I've been really amazed at how the community groups and the grassroot organizations have really come together and continue to do work in the community. There's a lot of people out there still going door to door to just check on each other or check on their neighbors. Offer food, offer services. Just make sure people have what they need.

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Beckie Gierer

There are people that are out there feeding their community members. They're getting donations to just help people who lost everything or are still trying to get back on their feet. There are people set up in the local parks in the impacted area to provide resources and services to those community members, and a lot of these folks were also survivors of this.

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Beckie Gierer

They're impacted themselves and they continue to give back and show up every day to help. It's amazing. And it is. While you often see a lot of negatives after a disaster and you hear a lot of negative, it's things like this, the positives that you see, the people helping each other, the resiliency that's building that really gives you hope and helps you stay kind of grounded in those moments.

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Bill Pollock

Beckie, something I was thinking about for this type of program, how long does this last after the initial impact of a disaster like this?

Beckie Gierer

It it does vary. Because this is a FEMA program. It is based on federal dollars. And so we depending on when we get the award for the program, that really depends for this specific program, we will be running through February of 2027.

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Beckie Gierer

So we have been going for about a year and a half by the time, almost two years by the time that this program will be done. Yeah. Which is a nice amount of time to be able to work with individuals and families and, and other groups in the community as they continue to work through disaster recovery, because it is not a quick process.

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Bill Pollock

Yeah. Yeah. That's a that's a great timeline. The Show-Me Hope crisis, crisis counseling program, through the state of Missouri. Where can listeners go if they want to get more information or get connected?

Beckie Gierer

Well, I will tell you, if you're in the community and you see blue shirts that say, show me hope, those are our crisis counselors.

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Beckie Gierer

So absolutely stop them and talk to them. If you are looking for the providers that are out there doing these services for them, Show-Me Hope crisis counseling program. You can go to our website, which is Mo show me hope dot org. And on there you can find all of the provider agencies and their names for who is providing services and the phone number to directly reach out to them.

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Beckie Gierer

And so you have eight agencies in Saint Louis City and County providing services. So yeah, BJC Behavioral Health, People's Health Center, Places for People, Queen of Peace, Saint Louis Health Department, Freedom Community Center, Inpower Institute, and Restorative Justice Movement. All of those agencies are working this. And then, of course, you can always call the Disaster Distress Helpline, which is toll free and 24 seven, multilingual and it's always available and it's confidential.

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Beckie Gierer

And that's the 1-800-985-5990 okay.

Bill Pollock

And this information too is always on our podcast too. Search show me today and you can reference back to that. The Show Me Hope crisis counseling program. Beckie Geer director of the Office of Disaster Services for the Missouri Department of Mental Health. Thank you for joining us. And thanks for the information and the great work your folks are doing.

00;12;22;16 - 00;12;34;09

Beckie Gierer

Thank you.

Bill Pollock

This is show me today the voice of Missouri.