

Mental health impacts of increasingly severe storms—lessons from the 2017 Atlantic storm season

May 20 2019, by Glenn O'neal

The 2017 Atlantic storm season provides important lessons on the need to anticipate and prepare for the mental health impacts of increasingly severe weather events, according to new research presented here at the American Psychiatric Association's 2019 Annual Meeting.

What makes the 2017 Atlantic hurricane season distinctive, the authors note, is that there was clear evidence that storm hazards are progressively worsening due to climate change. The increasing hazards significantly amplify the risks for severe mental health outcomes. They looked at several areas of potential impact of increased exposure to [extreme weather events](#) and disasters that carry implications for mental health consequences for storm survivors.

- Potentially traumatizing exposure during disaster impact can contribute to new [psychological distress](#), PTSD and other mental health concerns.
- Harmful effects on people with pre-existing mental health conditions; disasters and aftermath can exacerbate [chronic conditions](#) and disrupt treatment (medication or therapy).
- Storm-related impacts experienced after the event—losses, adversities and life changes—can contribute to psychological distress, grief, depression, anxiety and other mental health concerns.

Taken together, the litany of public health consequences predicts high rates of mental distress, mental disorders and traumatic bereavement. The powerful storms of 2017 destroyed power grids and crippled infrastructure, rendering affected populations wholly dependent on outside aid. Staple crops were destroyed, water supplies were contaminated, and Caribbean residents were exposed to insect-borne infectious diseases such as Zika and dengue. The storms' aftermath led to displacement and mass migration from island states with significant psychological implications.

"A look at the 2017 storms reveals the compelling need to better anticipate and respond to the psychological consequences of increasingly dangerous extreme weather events," study authors Zelde Espinel, M.D., M.A., M.P.H., and James M. Shultz, M.S., Ph.D., conclude.

Provided by American Psychiatric Association

Citation: Mental health impacts of increasingly severe storms—lessons from the 2017 Atlantic storm season (2019, May 20) retrieved 5 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-05-mental-health-impacts-increasingly-severe.html>

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