

The full extent of the environmental, economic and health impacts of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico region remains uncertain. How it may affect residents' mental health is a serious concern.

What do we know about stress?

There are at least three different types of stress, all of which carry physical and mental health risks.

- Routine stress related to the pressures of work, family and other daily responsibilities.
- Stress brought about by a sudden negative change, such as losing a job, divorce, or illness.
- Traumatic stress, in which a person experiences an event like a car accident, war, assault, or a natural disaster where one may be seriously hurt or in danger of being killed.

Research conducted after other disasters has shown that widespread loss is associated with significant distress and serious mental health conditions. We know that when jobs and a sense of control are lost, risk for many problems increases, including anger, shame, depression, substance abuse, domestic violence and even suicide.

Who may be affected by the Gulf oil spill disaster?

- Those who were directly impacted by the initial oil rig explosion;
- Those involved in containment and clean up;
- Those dealing with chronic physical and mental health conditions;
- Those whose jobs and livelihoods have been directly impacted by the disaster, and their families.

All of these groups may experience the stress of the disaster differently. People may feel hopeless, depressed, anxious, confused or angry. They may feel shock, guilt or mistrust of others, or lose confidence in themselves or others. For most, these initial reactions fade with time or improve with support from friends and family. When symptoms persist and the stress is ongoing, additional help from a mental health provider may be necessary.

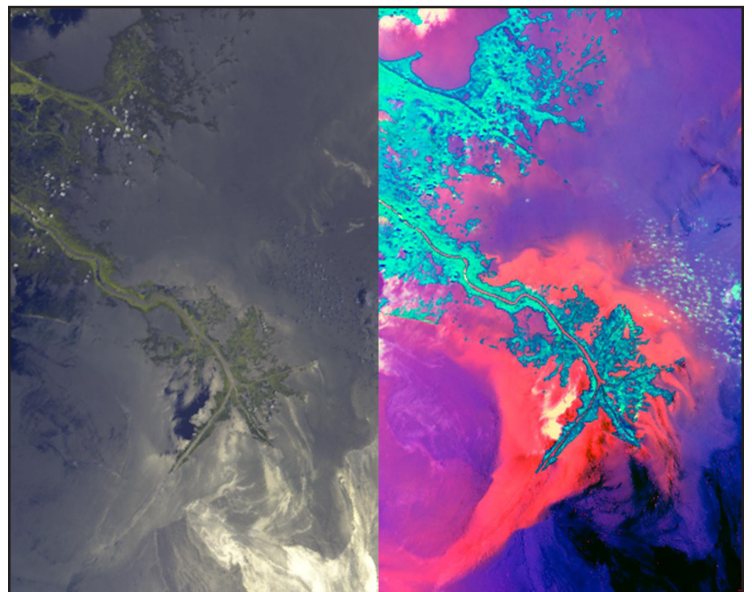
What should we expect?

As the scope of the Gulf disaster unfolds, more people may lose their jobs, incomes, businesses, and way of life. In addition, many may be concerned about exposure to chemicals and other contaminants associated with the disaster. This fear of the unknown can have a powerful effect on psychological and physical health. After similar prior disasters, people have worried about continued exposure to toxins, even when the actual danger passed. Those who perceived a continued danger tended to have higher levels of distress, physical problems, anxiety symptoms, sleep difficulties, and difficulty with concentration.

How to cope with continued uncertainty?

Take practical steps to maintain your health and outlook, stay connected to others, and stay hopeful.

- Recognize signs of stress, such as difficulty sleeping, increased alcohol and other substance use, being easily angered, feeling depressed, and having low energy.
- Get regular exercise and rest.
- Continue to get medical care for existing health problems.



NASA's Terra spacecraft captures two unique views of oil moving into Louisiana's coastal wetlands.

Image Credit: NASA/GSFC/LaRC/JPL, MISR Team



If you or someone you know is overwhelmed by the situation, ask for help from a medical or mental health professional. If you or someone close to you is in crisis, call the toll-free, 24-hour National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

How to cope with continued uncertainty? (continued)

- Stay informed about any real health risks associated with the disaster and learn about available assistance, but do not become glued to the TV.
- Set priorities—decide what must get done and what can wait.
- Note what you have accomplished at the end of the day, not what you have been unable to do.
- Stay in touch with those who can provide emotional and other support, and avoid dwelling on the problems many are facing.
- Schedule regular times for healthy and relaxing activities.
- Use alcohol, prescription drugs and over-the-counter medicines carefully, and avoid use of illegal substances.

The impact of the oil spill disaster may not be fully known for some time. But there is hope. Despite experiencing intense loss and trauma, people can rebound.



*Above: Example of the oil stranded on the North Chandeleur Islands on May 8, 2010
Image credit: NOAA*

*Top: An oil-free brown pelican at Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida
Image credit: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service*

Such resilience is part biological—our brains are wired for adaptation and survival. Our natural resilience can be nurtured by reaching out to others, taking action to reduce stress, and looking forward.

What informational resources are available?

From the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:

- BP Gulf Oil Spill: HHS Health Response
<http://www.hhs.gov/gulfoilspill/index.html>
- Tips for Dealing with the Gulf Oil Spill from SAMHSA
<http://samhsa.hhs.gov/Disaster/traumaticevents.aspx>

From the National Institute of Mental Health:

- Information on Coping with Traumatic Events
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/coping-with-traumatic-events/index.shtml>
- Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters: What Parents Can Do
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-violence-and-disasters-parents/index.shtml>
- Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters: What Community Members Can Do
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-violence-and-disasters-community-members/index.shtml>
- Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters: What Rescue Workers Can Do
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-violence-and-disasters-rescue-workers/index.shtml>