

Depression plaguing victims of Katrina

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - For three months after Hurricane Katrina's waters consumed her home, Michelle Thomas locked her stress deep inside and put on a brave face for her husband and two daughters.

She focused on the positive: Her Ninth Ward home was destroyed and her hospital job was gone, but her husband and children, ages 7 and 16, were alive and the family was together.

Then came Thanksgiving, celebrated in her mother's cramped home in a small Louisiana town.

Since then, the family has moved into a modest rental house they owned in a community an hour from New Orleans.

As Christmas approaches, the 36-year-old woman is feeling anything but joyful. Like many survivors, Thomas has the blues. "I go into a feeling of hopelessness, and I cry," she said.

The holiday season may make dealing with Katrina's fallout even tougher, mental health experts say, especially when there are few doctors, counselors or hospitals to help people deal with the loss of homes, jobs and lives.

"It's almost like a shotgun blast as opposed to a single bullet to social stability," said Bryan Gros, a Baton Rouge psychologist who works for the Mental Health Association of Louisiana. "People are having a hard time."

Thousands remain home-

less along the Gulf Coast, where the hurricane hit Aug. 29 and killed more than 1,300 people. It ripped apart families and communities, and wrecked businesses.

About half a million people — both survivors and the emergency workers who went to their aid — may need mental health services, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates.

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—U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

psychological counseling as a result of the storms, according to a survey by Louisiana State University, and 53 percent reported feeling depressed. A Katrina crisis hotline in Mississippi got 1,100 calls in its first two months, said Tessie Smith, spokeswoman for the state's mental health department.

Before Katrina, the National Suicide Prevention hotline got an average of about 3,000 calls a month from all over the country. Since the storm, monthly calls have more than doubled — 7,000 in October alone — with most new calls coming from Katrina-affected areas, said spokeswoman April Natu-

rals. Gros said suicides have spiked in Baton Rouge, and New Orleans coroner Dr. Frank Minyard who reviewed two suicide cases in one recent week fears more as the Christmas holiday nears.

"We don't have our medical system here. It's gone. That's a big problem," Minyard said. "I think it's going to end tragically for some of our citizens, not only here, but who are spread out all over the country."

Life did end tragically for Dr. Lisa Osberg-Wilson. Her New Orleans home and nearby dermatology practice weren't damaged in the hurricane. But most of her patients fled, and she missed her three little girls, who were living with relatives in Texas. Every day, on her commute to and from work, she drove by the destruction, perhaps worrying about the debt for a new office she was building.

Osberg-Wilson killed herself Nov. 4, three days after her 45th birthday. "I just think she had the weight of the world," whispered her brother, John Osberg of Cleveland, who said his sister had no history

of psychological problems. "Things were going well until the storm."

Her husband, Scott Wilson, who is also a doctor, said, "I am very confident in my heart that this would not have happened if the hurricane had not hit us."

He added that he hopes his wife's death brings attention to both post-traumatic stress disorder — a diagnosis she got a week before she died — and the great need for mental health services, which have been wrecked by the storm.

Officials in other states are scrambling to accommodate thousands of storm survivors with mental health systems that are already stretched.

In Houston, which has about 150,000 evacuees, the city used federal aid to add 40 counselors to community mental health centers and created a network of private therapists, said Betsy Schwartz, executive director of the Mental Health Association of Greater Houston.

Unlike many evacuees, who have been given Medicaid that covers mental

health care, most Houston residents in need are uninsured, she said.

"People who are in Houston because of Katrina have greater access to care than the people who were there before," Schwartz said.

In Biloxi, Miss., Daniel Claunch, 21, is living in a tent because his home was destroyed by Katrina. The wholesale battery salesman said he tries to be upbeat about what he still has, but it's a challenge.

"I've been dealing with this whole thing one day at a time. It is stressful late at night when I'm laying in bed in my tent and thinking I know I can do so much better than this, but this is how I'm going to have to start all over," he said.

Fred Bemak, a George Mason University psychology professor, recently returned from a two-week trip to Mississippi with graduate students who helped counsel more than 500 residents. The storm survivors' problems ranged from serious depression from losing loved ones to stress about having no holiday decorations.

Few mental health services will be available in Mississippi as the new year approaches — a year that for many will begin with financial troubles, family stress and frustration.

"The mental health needs are growing," Bemak said.

Back in New Orleans, Joyce Reese watched workers at the Canal Street hotel, her current home, erect a ceiling-high Christmas tree and string white twinkling lights around the lobby.

She was tired, but smiling. For her, the holiday is a retreat from sadness.

She thinks it will be helpful for people to get their minds off what happened and "to be thankful that you're still here because a lot of people are not here."

But survivors cheered up by the holidays are also at risk of a let-down when Christmas and New Year's are over, said Tallahassee Memorial Hospital psychologist Larry Kubiak.

"People put aside reality perception during the holidays for the sake of others," he said. "Unfortunately, that may be a temporary fix."



SMOOTH BIRTHDAY

Helping to celebrate Smooth C's birthday, his mother, Kathleen Knight, enjoys a special dance with her son. Smooth C celebrated his 41st birthday party Sunday at the Gold Coast Hotel and Casino.

Sentinel-Voice photo by Marty Frierson

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