

LOCAL

'Only just beginning': As tornado recovery continues, attention shifts to mental health

Olivia Krauth Louisville Courier Journal

Published 5:31 a.m. ET Jan. 6, 2022 | Updated 5:31 a.m. ET Jan. 6, 2022

Todd Hazel is a licensed social worker. He understands trauma.

So when tornadoes tore through Warren County, where Hazel oversees student services for one of Kentucky's largest school systems, he knew they needed to think about mental health immediately.

Alongside tweets about where to pick up food and drop off donations, Hazel's school district shared tip sheets on how to talk to kids about what happened and noted when families could talk to counselors.

Soon after, Hazel's district began offering free counseling to anyone in the area — whether they were affiliated with the district or not.

Related: Help us report on Western Kentucky's recovery from deadly tornadoes

The school system's offer is one way mental health advocates are working to connect tornado survivors in Western Kentucky with needed resources — ones which are typically tough to find and receive.

Now a few weeks after December's deadly tornadoes, Hazel said requests for counseling continue to trickle in. He expects the number to climb as survivors exit the "recovery phase" and begin to process lingering emotions.

Sarah Trover, who works for one of the region's largest mental health agencies, agreed.

"I feel like a lot of people jumped in" and helped with the area's immediate needs, she said, donating supplies and money.

But in the coming months, she continued, "people are going to start popping up more with the needs of their mental health."

"We're only just beginning in this," Trover said.

How does a disaster impact the brain?

Rachel Buehner, the president of the Kentucky Psychological Association, describes trauma as anytime our safety or wellbeing is out of our control.

A tornado would qualify as a traumatic experience.

When a natural disaster happens, the human brain focuses on survival. Trauma could begin to manifest anywhere from minutes to months, or even years, after an event, Buehner said.

Survivors may become afraid of storms or the dark. They may have intrusive thoughts about the tornadoes, or flashbacks. Sometimes, they'll notice mood swings or changes in their energy level or ability to focus.

Trauma is the brain's way of avoiding the bad thing that happened to it, Buehner explained. It is the brain's way of keeping us safe, but it can turn into an impairment that keeps us from living our lives, she continued.

It is important to practice “compassionate self-awareness” when processing trauma, she said. Survivors should understand a terrible thing happened to them, and it can be “a struggle to find a sense of normal” in the aftermath.

Humans need to have their basic needs covered before fully processing what happened, Buehner said.

A few weeks removed from the tornadoes, many survivors are still focused on stabilizing their lives — figuring out new housing, knowing where their next meal is coming from and cleaning up debris.

“The displacement piece is huge,” Buehner said. “We have a low tolerance of uncertainty.”

Finding pieces of stability, like bedtime routines, can help.

“The brain thrives on predictability and knowing what to expect, so that's why it's potentially so jarring to experience something that throws everything out of whack,” she explained.

Related: Did the Kentucky tornadoes damage your home or belongings? Here's how to get help from FEMA

Need to talk?

Talking helps people grapple with trauma. And that conversation doesn't necessarily have to be with a licensed therapist.

When David Graham put up scrap signs offering Dawson Springs residents the listening ear of a cowboy in the lot of a tornado-damaged gas station, at least 20 people stopped to chat within the first few hours.

“Need to talk? Cowboy cares!” one sign read.

Graham, an Ohio resident, frequently helps with disaster relief efforts. He isn't a therapist. But it helps to talk with someone when processing something traumatic, Buehner said, and that someone doesn't need to be in the mental health arena to be effective.

Talking to a friend, family member, faith leader or even a supportive stranger can help, too. What is important is having a place to address the bad things and receive support in return, Buehner said.

The more you can talk about a traumatic experience, the less power it will have over you, Buehner explained.

“It's scary to think about a terrifying event, but sharing about the experience and memories can reduce the impact of the trauma on mental health,” she said.

Addie Weaver wasn't initially sure what to make of the spray-painted signs and man in a cowboy hat at the Dawson Springs gas station. But talking helped.

“It was nice to have somebody that instead of saying, ‘Well, this is what I did or this is what you need to do,’ just to have somebody to listen,” she said.

More: How Kentucky tornado victims can apply for Disaster Unemployment Assistance

Barriers still there

Not everyone will need, or want, professional help after a traumatic event. But if someone is struggling with getting back to a sense of “normal” because of persistent issues with moods or relationships, Buehner suggested reaching out to a mental health provider.

That can be easier said than done.

Around 2.9 million Kentuckians live in an area without adequate access to mental health professionals, according to federal data.

While many of the Kentucky counties designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas for mental health are in the eastern portion of the state, some of the tornado-impacted counties also made the list.

Based on federal estimates, Kentucky has one-quarter of the number of counselors it needs.

Trover, who works as a site administrator for Four Rivers Behavioral Health, said the Western Kentucky region has an adequate number of mental health resources, but added, "We could definitely use more therapists."

COVID-19 offered a silver lining, Buehner pointed out: More providers began offering virtual therapy, making services more accessible to those who may not live near a therapist.

But those services are strained, she said, as demand outpaces supply across the state. And teletherapy may be difficult to access with spotty internet service.

The mental health care system can be tough to navigate as is. A natural disaster raises the normal barriers to therapy a few notches.

Those searching for a therapist may find their insurance, if they have it, isn't accepted or services are too expensive. Someone may not be able to get to appointments if they don't have transportation, like if they lost their car in the storm.

Trover's group has a van to help get people to and from therapy during more normal times, she said. People have been displaced all over because of the storm, she said, so public transportation and other community resources have stepped in to help.

But what happens when the overwhelming support Western Kentucky has seen eventually runs out, she asked.

Kentucky tornado victims: Remembering those who died in the December storms

Stepping in to help

In the wake of the storm, tornado survivors sought refuge in Western Kentucky's state parks. So, therapists from Trover's agency began spending time at the resorts each day for anyone who needed to talk.

They also held pop-up events at the resorts and local libraries, offering therapy and fun.

Using board games, art tutorials, corn hole and therapy dogs, the pop-up events aimed to give survivors a place to de-stress, Trover said.

Thanks to an influx of donations, impacted families sometimes got to take games and UNO cards with them afterward.

Like with the larger recovery effort, the mental health support has been a team effort.

Trover's group frequently partnered with other mental health organizations in the area. State behavioral health leaders have also been helpful, she said. People behind a grant Four Rivers uses for The Zone, a drop-in center for those ages 13 to 25, asked how the money can be used for recovery efforts like the pop-up events.

Working with the West Kentucky Educational Cooperative, several impacted districts plan on making counseling easier to access — at least for those inside schools.

A team from WKEC will be on-hand this week for staff in Mayfield Independent Schools, Superintendent Joe Henderson told WFPL. They'll stick around for when students return next week.

Interested in education? Sign up for The Hall Pass, our education newsletter

When students return to classrooms in the roughly 550-student district of Dawson Springs, hopefully in mid-January, they'll have "quite a bit" of counseling available, Superintendent Leonard Whalen said.

Warren County Public Schools, Hazel's district which serves more than 16,000 students around Bowling Green, has around 30 counselors ready to listen, he said.

Despite a push over recent years to get more mental health counselors in schools, the majority of schools don't have enough mental health practitioners. The positions can be easier to fill in larger districts with more money or with a larger area to recruit from.

About half of the counselors on hand in WCPS come from Hazel's team. The other half are people in private practice in the area who offered to work with survivors pro bono.

When kids returned to class this week, "quite a few" counselors were inside impacted schools to talk with kids directly.

"We will be there as long as it takes," he said.

Resources for those looking for help

Each county has a Community Mental Health Center, or CMHC, assigned to it. The Cabinet for Health and Family Services has a tool (dbhdid.ky.gov/cmhc/) to find the center and contact information for your county. The Kentucky Psychological Association has a locator tool (<https://www.kpa.org/find-a-clinician>) to search for service providers across the state.

The Kentucky Psychological Foundation has a how-to guide (<https://www.kentuckypsychologicalfoundation.org/roadmap-to-behavioral-health>) on finding and securing mental health services, including information on insurance and how to get started with treatment. The governor's office compiled a list of resources (<https://governor.ky.gov/tornadoreources>) for tornado survivors, including links to eight mental health options in the region.

Reporter Bailey Loosemore contributed to this story.

Reach Olivia Krauth at okrauth@courierjournal.com and on Twitter at [@oliviakrauth](https://twitter.com/oliviakrauth).