

The Tempest Within



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On the heels of Hurricane Harvey, which devastated the city of Houston and other communities in Texas and Louisiana, Hurricane Irma ravaged several islands in the Caribbean—and then headed for the states. In the days before she made landfall in the US, the media offered seemingly minute-to-minute updates on her progress. Each new forecast seemed to contradict the previous, demonstrating the unpredictability of natural disasters. But as the hurricane crept closer, one thing was evident: Florida was going to take a hard hit.

Keeping up with the fluctuating weather report was like watching a tennis match: East Coast ... nope, not the East Coast ... probably the middle of the state. We breathed periodic sighs of relief but remained leery. Then, several of the spaghetti plots (may I never hear that term again!) showed Irma veering west—right over our heads. Hysteria set in. One meteorologist sounded absolutely frantic as she warned people to GET READY!!!!

Now, to be clear: My purpose in writing is not to disparage media coverage or governmental response, nor to minimize anyone else's struggles. Rather, I want to share how the hurricane affected my neighbors, friends, family, and myself—and continues to do so, weeks afterward.

Once Irma's course was set, we swept into action. Our emergency plan included hurricane-proofing our home—protective awnings placed over the windows; outside decorations put away; grill stored properly; palm trees trimmed—and laying in sufficient supplies (gallon jugs of water, needed medications, bread and peanut butter). We gathered important documents, filled the car with gas, and made sure to have cash on hand. This flurry of activity got the adrenaline pumping, but there was something satisfying about checking off each item on our

list. Before you knew it, we were set.

Then Governor Scott took the proactive step of declaring a state of emergency, before Irma was even in striking distance. This was beneficial for all Floridians, since it positioned us to receive federal assistance if needed and allowed local officials to act quickly, without the burden of bureaucracy or red tape.

However, as this news spread, our phones began to ring, buzz, and ping. Friends around the country wanted to know, "Are you okay?" and to offer us a place to stay if we needed to get out. These well-intentioned messages were appreciated—but each expression of concern reminded us that we were facing something big. We were fine, though. Prepared. And the storm could still bypass us or at least hit in a weakened state.

As Irma moved closer, the nervous energy in our little community began to rise. Some neighbors headed north several days before the predicted arrival, spending hours in traffic. We were glad we'd decided to shelter

in place instead! Our decision was met with worried looks and wringing hands, which perplexed us. After all, we live about two miles from the Gulf of Mexico and 40-plus feet above sea level. My parents had moved to the area in 1978, and Dad always told us it was where people evacuated *to*, not *from*. No problem!

Except ... then the mandatory evacuation notice was given. Uh oh! Time to revisit our "shelter in place" plan. What were the options again?

Plan A: Call a friend who lives three towns away in a non-evacuation zone. But her daughter gets evacuated every storm, so she, her husband, and their three dogs had already claimed the guest room.

Plan B: Call another friend in the next town over. She was happy to accommodate

➤ We are thankful to have survived the wrath of Hurricane Irma. But that's not the end of the story.

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us! We planned to arrive the night before the predicted hit and wait out the storm there. The plan was foolproof ... until she also got a mandatory evacuation notice.

Plan C: Find a hotel in a safe area. No luck—all booked.

Admittedly, with each snag in our plans, our stress and anxiety increased. We began to question our initial decision to stay put. Had we missed our opportunity to get out of town?

Then, thankfully, the phone rang. Our friend's daughter had miraculously secured us hotel rooms about 30 miles from our home.

The strangest thing about riding out a hurricane is that you have days of anticipation and action—you prepare—and then you just have to *wait*. In the confines of our “bunker,” we had naught to do but track the storm. For three days, local television stations aired only the weather; there was no respite from the red tracking markers. The endless barrage of information added to our already heightened stress levels. We wondered what we would face once we returned home. The thought of major damage sickened us.

Three days after Irma visited, we were cleared to head home. We were admittedly nervous to see what she had left behind—but incredibly, we found our house exactly as we had left it. We hugged each other, in tears. The surrounding damage ranged from minor to major, but thankfully, no one was injured. Neighbors who had fled town asked us to send pictures of their homes so they could see for themselves. The consensus: What was broken can be fixed; we are all thankful to have survived. In a way, I expected that to be the end of the story. But I was wrong.

In my February 2010 editorial, I addressed the aftermath of the earthquake

that had struck Haiti the month before.¹ Seven years later, 2.5 million Haitians are still in need of humanitarian aid, and 55,000 people are in camps and makeshift camps.² You might be thinking, “An earthquake in Haiti is much different from a hurricane in the United States.” That may be true, but some victims of Hurricane Sandy are still trying to repair damage to their homes, five years later.³ So while Hurricanes Irma and Harvey—let alone Hurricane Sandy—are already off the front pages, the despair, emotional impact, and disbelief associated with the disasters endure. As one woman described, “You’re in complete shock. You’re trying to figure out, ‘Is this happening to me? Am I in some sort of dream I can’t wake up from?’”³

We are not people who are easily discouraged or quick to worry about things we can’t control. But this experience was very different: The sensory overload was unnerving, and the anxiety and stress linger. As a result, I have an entirely new perspective on the effect of disaster on mental health. The worst we suffered was four days without power, yet as I write this weeks later, I find myself in tears, reliving the fear and anxiety we felt during Irma’s wrath. We were ready for a hurricane, but not for the emotional turmoil that has followed.

Have you experienced a disaster, natural or otherwise, that left you shaken? Share your experience, and any advice you may have, with me at NPeditor@frontlinemed.com. **CR**

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