

Psychological Evaluations, Referrals, and Follow-up of Adolescents After Their Exposure to Hurricane Hugo

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PROBLEM There is little understanding of adolescent appraisal of stress and crisis intervention for adolescents who are exposed to major stress such as that of a natural disaster.

METHODS. A description of the psychological evaluations, referrals, and follow-up assessments made by nurse practitioners (NPs) and a nurse psychotherapist (NPT) of adolescents (N = 507) in two South Carolina high schools who experienced Hurricane Hugo.

FINDINGS. The NPs' evaluations concluded that 63 adolescents (12%) exhibited symptoms of psychological distress. The NPs referred 36 of these adolescents to high school counselors for minor distress or school-related problems and 27 for more intensive clinical evaluation by an NPT. Of the 27 adolescents who were referred to the NPT, 10 had symptoms associated with adolescent adjustment reaction, 8 showed symptoms of depression, 5 revealed symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, and 4 complained of serious family problems.

CONCLUSIONS Based on these data and the mental processes described by these adolescents, the authors propose a model and suggest adolescent appraisal of stress and crisis is a critical issue to consider when intervening with adolescents who are exposed to major stressors, including those associated with a disaster.

Key words: Adolescent disaster stress, adolescent stress and coping, disaster, psychological distress

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Nurses must be aware of the unique precipitants and manifestations of stress and crises experienced by adolescents in order to make appropriate mental health evaluations, interventions, and referrals. Since all adolescents are at risk for mental health problems (Blos, 1962; Ladley & Puskar, 1994; Offer, Ostrov, & Howard, 1981; Rutter, 1979), it is reasonable to conjecture that those faced with a catastrophic event may be at even greater risk. Data about the number and nature of adolescents who require mental health services subsequent to a disaster are very limited. There are no published studies about the mental processes that occur in adolescents following a disaster. Therefore, the researchers embarked upon this study in which nurse practitioners (NPs) and a nurse psychotherapist (NPT) performed psychological evaluations on a large sample of South Carolina adolescents one year after their exposure to Hurricane Hugo.

Theoretical Considerations

Theorists have described adolescence as a stage of maturational crisis because of the numerous changes and stressors to which an adolescent must adapt (Peterson, 1983). Teenagers must manage the onset of puberty, develop a sense of identity, and establish peer relationships while simultaneously attempting to separate from parents (Thomas, Shoffner, & Groer, 1988). Scientific and popular literature also confirm numerous situational crises and stressors for the youth of this particular generation. Today's youth must confront more violence, dysfunctional families, and technological