

One disaster after another, could fatigue set in?

October 3 2017, by Ayleen Barbel Fattal



Credit: Florida International University

The largest mass shooting in modern U.S. history has rocked Las Vegas,

pushing the aftermath of Hurricane Maria to inside pages of newspapers and well beyond top-of-the-hour stories in news broadcasts. Just a week prior, news of Hurricane Maria had claimed the top spot from the earthquakes of Mexico, which had replaced headlines about Hurricane Irma. Before that, it was Hurricane Harvey and its assault on Texas and the Gulf coast. Scientists now wonder if disaster fatigue is about to set in.

When one disaster overshadows the other, the urge to act can diminish, according to FIU geologist and earthquake expert Grenville Draper. That means fewer volunteers, less financial support and that those in a position to help no longer feel compelled to engage.

Since late August, the news cycle has largely been dominated by stories of devastation, desperate need for aid and the escalating number of casualties brought on by each. Even when not directly impacted by the event, constant exposure to such diverse [disasters](#)—natural or man-made—can result in serious post-traumatic stress symptoms and other [mental health issues](#), according to FIU Psychologist Jonathan Comer.

"Increasingly, research is finding that consuming large doses of disaster-related news can lead to very real anxiety and mood problems," Comer said. "Repeated exposure to news reports filled with decontextualized tragedy and human suffering can also foster increased cynicism, decreased compassion and empathy, and an overall sense of hopelessness."

Comer says some people may become desensitized when multiple disasters make news, which may interfere with taking adequate precautions as new, potentially threatening events approach. Others may become hyper-sensitized and develop more immediate, serious negative emotional responses to [news](#) about disasters. In either case, Comer stresses the importance of addressing the mental health needs of those

who have been exposed to these disasters.

"Although the majority of people exposed to disasters show great resilience, a reliable proportion will go on to develop very serious mental health difficulties," Comer said. "Early intervention is critical."

Comer has conducted extensive research on the psychological impact of terrorism and other traumatic events on youth, including the Boston Marathon bombing and the September 11 attacks. As director of the Mental Health Interventions and Technology Program at FIU's Center for Children and Families, he conducts research on expanding the quality, scope and accessibility of [mental health](#) care for youth. Much of his work examines children's media-based exposure to [traumatic events](#).

Provided by Florida International University

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