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Gulf Residents Likely Face Decades of Psychological Impact From BP's Oil Disaster

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In-depth Report: THE BP OIL SLICK

While the devastating ecological impacts of BP's oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico are obvious, the less visible but also long-lasting psychological, community and personal impacts could be worse, according to social scientists, psychologists and psychiatrists.

"People are becoming more and more hopeless and feeling helpless," Dr. Arwen Podesta, a psychiatrist at Tulane University in New Orleans told Truthout. "They are feeling frantic and overwhelmed. This is worse than [Hurricane] Katrina. There is already more post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and more problems with domestic violence, threats of suicide and alcohol and drugs."

Dr. Podesta, who also works in addiction clinics and hospitals said, "It's a remarkably similar experience to that of the stressors of Katrina. There is an acute event, but then a long-term increase in hopelessness with every promise that is broken. Like a promise for money to rebuild a life, then people are put through red tape and each time they fail to move forward, they take five steps back in their psychological welfare."

"The total number of years this will affect us is unknown," Dr. Podesta said, adding, "however, it could affect us for possibly 20 to 30 years."

Dr. Janet Johnson, an associate professor of psychiatry at Tulane University, told Truthout, "People are on edge. People are feeling grief. I'm hearing of physical illnesses related to the oil and people are worried about losing their home, their culture, their way of life."

Sociologists studying the current BP disaster, along with other man-made disasters, make a distinction between "natural" and "technological" disasters.

"What we find in our field when we study technological disasters, i.e., human made disasters, is that the impacts are chronic," Dr. Anthony Ladd, a professor of sociology at Loyola University explained to Truthout. "They don't really end. With a natural disaster, like Hurricane Katrina for Mississippi, although we experienced that as a technological disaster with the levee failure here in New Orleans, the only silver lining with a natural disaster like that is that people move through it. They actually end up building a stronger community, there's more social capital [trust] going on in the community and people find they have to rely on each other."

Other sociologists, like Dr. Steven Picou with the University of South Alabama, defines technological disaster as "a human-caused contamination of the ecosystem" and explains that they are "not a typical part of the geographical area you live in."

Dr. Picou has studied other technological disasters for the last 30 years, including the Exxon Valdez disaster in Alaska in 1989. He, like Dr. Ladd, points to another important distinction between natural and technological disasters – that there is a drawn out period of recovery and accompanying uncertainty that make technological disasters, like the BP oil disaster, much more threatening to the health and welfare of affected people and communities along the Gulf Coast.

"With natural disasters, there is this sense that they will get through it and there is a light at the end of the tunnel," Dr. Ladd explained. "Yes this is horrible, yes we've lost our homes, yes people have been killed, but we're going to pick ourselves up at some point, dust ourselves off and we can see recovery down the road. But with technological disasters you don't get that. It's a very different spiral into a malaise, into anxiety, into a feeling that there is no end in sight. You don't know when the impacts are going to stop."

Dr. Anthony Ladd, showing a cover story about trauma caused by the BP oil disaster. (Photo: Erika Blumenfeld © 2010)

August 29 is the five-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Dr. Johnson, like others in the social sciences, explained that much of Louisiana was still in recovery from that disaster. Thus, the BP disaster has augmented and restimulated traumas from Katrina.

"It's a long-term stressor, the damage is done even if it's capped," Dr. Johnson explained. "Who knows what the long term repercussions are. When can we eat seafood? Has it destroyed the marshes? What about a hurricane? Will we be covered in oil? This area is still recovering from Katrina, so this just puts an added burden on the mental health care system. We have much fewer services than we did pre-Katrina, because a lot of our major hospitals have not reopened and our conservative governor wants to privatize everything, so they've cut services."

Dr. Ladd, whose major area of research centers around the impacts of environmental disasters on communities, draws direct parallels between the BP oil disaster and the Exxon Valdez disaster. "You don't know when the BP check is going to show up in the mail, if ever. You don't know when the feds and the state are going to do their thing, toward recovery. It's

a chronic unending spiral of people into often deeper and deeper levels of anxiety, and research shows that one of the major sources of anxiety is the litigation process itself. So on top of everything else the disaster throws at you, then you have the decade long experience of trying to litigate your way back to your economic livelihood or trying to get some kind of economic compensation for what you've lost and of course that never comes."

Using the 1989 Exxon disaster as an example of this, in 2008 a corporate-friendly Supreme Court took the original $5 billion judgment against Exxon from 1994 and ended up granting only 1/10th the amount, $500 million, to the citizens of Cordova.

"So they weren't able to save their businesses and many weren't able to stay in the community," Dr. Ladd said. "The litigation process itself is a huge source of anxiety and we're not anywhere near seeing what that's going to be like in this case, given that the dimensions of this disaster are way beyond what we saw in Alaska."

Another impact we can likely expect from the BP oil disaster comes from what Dr. Picou has written:

> "Chronic economic impacts systematically invade the social fabric, causing a cascade of social pathology for communities, families and individuals. The sociological lessons of the Exxon Valdez for the human condition clearly document this fact. Because of fear and uncertainty regarding the ecological consequences of the Exxon Valdez, intense social conflict emerged within communities, causing the fragmentation and marginalization of various groups."

Sociologists define this type of collective trauma as the "corrosive community," which contrasts with "therapeutic communities" that typically emerge in the wake of natural disasters. Corrosive communities are typified by loss of trust, uncertainty regarding the future and anger that results from technological disasters.

Dr. Picou is currently involved in studies involving Gulf Coast communities that have been directly impacted by BP's oil.

"Picou is already talking about the parallels he's seeing," Dr. Ladd said. "Community, family and individual impacts. So in addition to psychological stress, you've got a spike in domestic violence, suicides. There were over 13 suicides attributed to the spill in Cordova and a spike in divorce rates. These are some of the very common impacts that we know that tend to be associated with technological disasters."

The National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University conducted a study from July 19 to July 25, including surveying of 1,200 coastal residents in Louisiana and Mississippi.

"There's been a very overt effort by BP and the Coast Guard to project a sense that the crisis is over, but this is far from the case," Dr. Irwin Redlener, the director of the center and president of the Children's Health Fund, a sponsor of the survey, reported. "Our survey shows a persistent and overwhelming level of anxiety among families living near the coast, driven by both medical symptoms in their children as well as a substantial level of psychological stress."

“I’ve seen a lot of people teetering on the edge of wellness since Katrina who now have increased fears and are decompensating into severe depression and resurgence of PTSD from Katrina,” Dr. Podesta said. “I work in addiction and I’ve seen a lot of increase in alcohol and other drugs, domestic violence and making severe threats about suicide, or threats towards their spouse and children. I’m seeing that more often now, directly related to the fear of what may happen to the livelihoods, lifestyles and economics of folks being directly affected.”

The loss of livelihood is one of the key causes of stress from the BP oil disaster. (Photo: Erika Blumenfeld © 2010)

Dr. Johnson is seeing the same thing: “Something like this stresses families, kids, relationships. After Katrina we saw a spike in domestic violence and divorces or break ups. Traumatized kids saw their parents fighting. Substance abuse increases, which leads to fueling domestic violence and crime. It’s a ripple effect and the longer it goes on, with unemployment or inability to return to their way of life, the worse things will get. We already have a high stress level and now this on top if it. We saw a rise in suicides after Katrina, so people see their families fall apart and unemployment continues, these are real concerns, along with the psychosocial effects.”

Dr. Podesta’s work as a psychiatrist is uncovering countless examples of what the sociologists have predicted would happen with this disaster and how the current situation is compounded because of the lingering psychological affects from Katrina. “The time frame makes this worse. In Katrina we had a succinct number affected in their homes and a reasonable time frame we could project, three to five years, for recovery. The unknowns with our current situation, for the long-term projected problems, are so severe, like a fishermen’s financial livelihood. Yet, for this BP disaster, the groundwork was Katrina. That was the base this was laid upon, so every insult with this crisis restimulates all the PTSD and problems from Katrina. PTSD is usually one incident that results in hopelessness, helplessness and fear of death. It usually peaks then comes back down. But with the continued insults to hope and welfare, instead of dropping back down, it kind of step ladders up with each insult. So Louisiana’s parishes with people more directly affected now, they’re suffering the most.”

Dr. Irene McIntosh, an associate professor at the University of South Alabama, works as a counselor educator. “The most immediate response I’m seeing that began with the explosion on April 20 is a sense of disbelief. Like, we can’t be going through something else again,” she told Truthout.

What she is seeing in Alabama is parallel to that in Louisiana, with regard to the current disaster being augmented by past trauma from Hurricane Katrina. “We’re coming up on the fifth anniversary of Katrina and most of our citizens had the sense we were recovering and seeing the light at the end of a very long tunnel,” Dr. McIntosh explained, adding, “and then this is like a huge setback psychologically. Now we’re back in it again and there’s a sense of impotence, that there’s nothing we can do.”

“People need to realize that even though it’s five years after Katrina, this is like pouring salt in a wound, it’s an added psychological insult, people are more vulnerable and many are being re-traumatized,” Dr. Johnson explained. “It’s a different catastrophe, but things were never back to normal and I think a lot of the country doesn’t realize that. This on top of it, makes it that much harder and brings back Katrina very vividly and we’re in the middle of hurricane season. You see increased anxiety in August and September anyway because of Katrina, but with the oil out there, it makes it tenfold worse, because you have these nightmares of an oil-covered city. You have to look at all of this in the context of Katrina.”

“After a storm you can do something,” Dr. McIntosh added. “But with this, you really are at the mercy of BP and the folks in charge, as to how much you can do. So it’s a very disempowering sense that is prevalent.”

While Dr. McIntosh does not currently see people professionally, in the context of her being a community leader who did immense work toward helping people in the wake of Katrina, she continues to talk to people daily about their trauma from the BP oil disaster.

“From the beginning everybody recognized how big this is and that it had major potential impacts because the shrimping season was just about to begin,” she said. “Then, as it went on, we started seeing businesses fail and tourism take a hit because people weren’t coming because of their perceptions of what it would be like here. Then when the tourists didn’t come, restaurants and other businesses began to suffer. Listening to them agonize about if they’ll be able to stay in business is a very painful process. I know fishermen in Louisiana who are in fear that their entire way of life is ending. How to you respond to that? How do you give them hope or something to hold onto? So basically what I do is listen. A lot.”

Dr. Ladd cites current examples of what Dr. Podesta refers to as “re-stimulating” stressors in people affected by this disaster. “The exact same phrases that BP are using come right out of the playbook of what Exxon used 21 years ago. Right now, looking at the parallels between the spill in Cordova and what we see now in the Gulf, a lot of similar patterns are starting to emerge. You’ve got levels of psychological stress and anxiety affecting a significant minority of the population. As the litigation of the impacts grow, that’s going to increase. For example, Picou found this last year when he was back in Cordova, that so many had to leave because they were economically displaced – the fishing industry was destroyed, the herring industry was destroyed, the pink salmon runs have never come back of course. All the other marine impacts that you’re seeing here – sea birds, turtles, sharks, every day this stuff is in the paper. Not withstanding all those wildlife impacts and ecological effects, the stress impacts, still, they found in Cordova are at a sub-clinical level. PTSD, which is the equivalent in stress to rape and murder experiences, they are still finding that

level of anxiety affecting somewhere between 30 to 35 percent of the Cordova population."

Dr. McIntosh told Truthout she is concerned about the long-term psychological impacts of this disaster. "That is what I'm concerned most about because anytime you're under long term stress, whether it's economic, you're losing your home or boat and your business, then those translate into experiences of depression, increased family chaos, increased difficulty with interpersonal relationships and a decrease in self-efficacy that I can take care of myself and my family. There is anger that exists throughout our region and it's an anger of feeling betrayed by those who were in charge, that they didn't make sure there were legitimate steps taken to respond to this."

Dr. McIntosh explained the complexity Gulf Coast residents face with the BP disaster and how the complexity of their proximity to the Gulf of Mexico causes them stress yet also provides strength. "This spill has affected everyone along the Gulf Coast. We all value the natural beauty of our coast and the connection with nature. We're moved by the site of brown pelicans. We laugh with joy when we see the dolphins playing off the boat in the Mississippi Sound. There is something so special about our connection to our Gulf that links everything – our livelihoods, our sense of connectedness, our spiritual awareness and this disaster has just taken away the sureness that everyone would wake up and it would be there. And that uncertainty and experience has been across the board. That will go with us whatever the trajectory is for the rest of our lives."

She feels people's resilience will play a key role in the future. "Gulf Coast residents are very resilient people, but this is one more big test of that resilience and you get weary of sucking it up one more time. Having to summon from within yourself the will to persevere through yet another catastrophe and this one, there's been levels of disconnect from communication, trying to figure out who was in charge, how to connect to a way to get reimbursed for your losses, it's again been that same difficulty with communication that increases frustration and decreases the sense of self-efficacy. I can't move beyond the fact that this is also my experience. The sadness, the connection I have to the Gulf. Yet, also the sheer awe I have at the strength of our people to keep on adapting and coping and dealing with one thing after another. It leaves me amazed. While I know we're going to have psychological decay, I see the strength and ability to persevere that is often easy to overlook."

Dr. Ladd believes recovery from the BP oil disaster will take decades. "We need to stop thinking of this as a sprint and think of it as a marathon. This disaster and its impacts are going to go on for at least a decade and it could be more. It's hard to put into words the astronomical ways in which this disaster is likely to affect the Gulf Coast."

He underscores how the court battles that are sure to span years, if not decades, will negatively affect people. "The litigation process is a key source of stress, anxiety and one of the key economic expenditures of the people affected, who already are short on money. Exxon had very deep pockets and said from the very beginning they would not pay a penny of that judgment unless they had to. Despite all the PR about "making you whole," they said very clearly and publicly and not just in court to the lawyers, that we will not pay a penny of this judgment if we can prevent it. BP hasn't started saying that yet because it's far too early."

Dr. Riki Ott is a marine biologist, toxicologist and Exxon Valdez survivor from Cordova, Alaska. She told Truthout that when companies like Exxon/Mobile or BP tell people, "we will

make you whole" it really means, "We'll see you in court."

Dr. Ott provided figures about how severely people in her community were initially affected from the 1989 disaster. "In our communities in Alaska that were affected by the Exxon Valdez disaster, we had 99 percent increase in PTSD, 99 percent increase in anxiety disorder, 99 percent increase in depression," she explained.

Dr. Ladd is deeply concerned about the negative, long lasting affects of this disaster on coastal communities. "We all have a point where it's very tough to swallow and comprehend the enormity of the risks that we've created for ourselves. This is a very real problem and even happens with educators, scientists and certainly with Gulf Coast residents. It's like watching the death of a loved one for a lot of people. I have the deepest sympathy for the fishermen here. Can you imagine New Orleans without oysters? It's as central to our way of life as salmon is to the Northwest. But here we are. A lot of people are at their wits end."

He feels a key problem is that this disaster creates a series of tipping points where the impacts in the marine ecology bleed into the economic, social and psychological realms. This creates, according to Dr. Ladd, "A trickle up and trickle down set of impacts that chronically keep multiplying into themselves. Look at Alaska, people are still reeling with anxiety, grief and denial from what happened in 1989. We need to know what happened in Alaska to prepare ourselves for and anticipate even greater impacts here in the Gulf."

Dr. Ladd is not hopeful about what he sees. "Are we going to wake up in time to grasp the enormity of this disaster so that we can grapple with it accordingly and what we've got to do to prevent it in the future? I'm not feeling real sanguine at the moment about the possibilities of that happening anytime soon."

Dr. McIntosh, on the other hand, believes people's resiliency coupled with community strength will play a key role in the recovery effort. "Along the coast some of our networks are training peer listeners so people have someone to talk to in order to make meaning of what they are experiencing and to decrease the stress," she said.

Dr. Podesta feels that more political attention and funding needs to be aimed at mental health for those affected by the BP oil disaster, in addition to bringing justice to those responsible for creating the crisis. "Mental health needs to be part of the human rights we're seeking assistance for," she said. "We need to talk about mental health as what we're advocating for along with the other things that whoever is responsible for all of this needs to be held accountable."

Dr. Johnson, after explaining that claims made to BP will not include mental health claims, said that she is advocating a more community based mental health support system, but that this will require funding that Louisiana's Governor Jindal, President Obama or BP appear, thus far, unwilling to provide. "There's going to be a need for more money for more mental health services, but where will that come from?" she asked. "We all know it's a problem, but we're usually the first ones to get cut when it comes to funding. Over the past five years it's become more prevalent here, more publicized, Katrina de-stigmatized mental health treatment because everybody was stressed out, but at the same time they keep cutting services. The awareness is not accompanied by real action or dollars. People talk about the mental health effects, but they don't want to put their money where their mouth is."

Dr. Ladd speaks to this as well. "Note the stories in the news about trying to get mental

health funding for this expected jump in PTSD among coastal residents. The experience we know from studying other technological disasters, that's probably going to not only be well needed, but probably inadequate."

He concluded that the key, long-term solution is for the US to wean itself from the oil-based economy. "I want to be an optimist and think that people will be able to get through this, but at another level, I can't feel very confident because the way all these cultural and economic forces tend to dull our ability to react and speak truth to power and express our outrage politically, as well as being able to look down the road and start to transition to a clean, renewable alternative energy economy, that we should have started 20 years ago," he explained. "If we don't do that, I don't know how we can hope to handle any other serious problem down the road. This really is a test of that. Lack of knowledge is not the problem, it's lack of political will."
