

People in the Philly region are 'still reeling' emotionally from Hurricane Ida. Now, more rain is coming

June 6 2022, by Justine McDaniel



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Driving home from work, Kristin Herman was gripping her steering

wheel hard. It was mid-April, and one of the region's heaviest rainstorms since Hurricane Ida was hurtling through Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

With the rain coming down, Herman, 37, couldn't help but think about the harrowing drive she'd made from her family's Downingtown home months earlier to escape Ida's flooding. With her husband, Ross, at work and unable to get home on the highway, she had fled with their two young daughters to a friend's house.

"By far the worst drive of my life. I never want to drive in rain now ever again," said Herman, who described herself as "white-knuckled" that April day. "Driving in rain now is awful."

The memory of that night was lasting. These days, when she can, Herman works from home to avoid traveling in [bad weather](#). Ross has become more afraid to leave his family when he works evening shifts.

That type of anxiety is just one way Herman and her family still feel the effects of Hurricane Ida, whose remnants destroyed much of their split-level home when it devastated the region in September. It took a long-term hotel stay, months of work, and about \$85,000 to repair their home.

They're not alone in feeling some fear. As climate change supercharges [severe weather events](#), seasonal anxiety is becoming more widespread. From Californians who dread the [high winds](#) that can spread wildfires to Texans now nervous about potential winter freezes, an ever-growing number of Americans are touched by weather-related trauma and anxiety, including in the Philadelphia region.

Here, it means grappling with post-traumatic stress after Ida and other recent storms. With the Atlantic hurricane season starting—it began Wednesday—Ida's landfall nine months ago remains fresh in the minds of those worst affected.

"We're all still reeling from it," said Nikki Milholin, whose street in Mont Clare, Montgomery County, was devastated by Ida's flooding. "The kids who went through this still, of course, have trauma and anxiety... from being rescued by a boat and watching your neighborhood pretty much wash away."

Starting this month, more rain is coming—the annual threat heightened by the effects of climate change, which can strengthen hurricanes and increase the likelihood of flooding.

This year's hurricane season is expected to be as severe as or worse than last year, with above-normal numbers of tropical storms possible in this region again.

And both temperatures and precipitation in the Philadelphia region have a probability of being higher than normal for June, July, and August, the National Weather Service forecast last week.

After a weather disaster, people can experience a wide range of post-traumatic stress reactions, including sadness, depression, and anxiety that the disaster could recur. Anniversaries of the event or the start of the next season can trigger stress, said Karla Vermeulen, deputy director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at State University of New York New Paltz.

Post-traumatic stress reactions are not the same as post-traumatic stress disorder, a clinical condition, but can still cause suffering, Vermeulen said.

Pennsylvania has seen other destructive hurricanes, but many of the region's residents described Ida's flooding and tornadoes as a worst-in-their-memory storm. And many say the same thing: It's going to happen again.

"The term that people are starting to use for it is ecoanxiety," Vermeulen said. "It's just that sense of dread, that sense of being out of control, being helpless."

Whenever Kimberly Capparella and her husband drive between Norristown and King of Prussia, they cross the bridge over the Schuylkill and remember how high the river came last fall. They suffered about \$50,000 in damage to their Norristown home, which has been in Capparella's family for generations.

"When we go over through King of Prussia and I see the water, we just look at each other," said Capparella, 51. "And I'm just like, oh my gosh. It's always in the back of your head, but you try not to think about it."

Still, the effects linger. Capparella's 13-year-old daughter has suffered from anxiety. Milholin said her children used to tremble when it rains, and her son still asks if it's going to flood every time there's rainfall. The flood has shown up in the Hermans' daughters' school artwork, and whenever something gets misplaced at home, the girls, 5 and 8, think it was lost in the flood.

At Legal Aid of Southeastern Pennsylvania, Sara Planthaber has worked with dozens of clients who survived Ida. She's seen trauma in the community.

"People are like, 'I didn't sleep last night; we had a thunderstorm,'" said Planthaber, a staff attorney who has worked on about 50 Ida cases. "Every single time it rains, people get anxious and nervous."

The fear of a repeat event also affects those who provide services to disaster victims. Legal Aid staff are already discussing the inevitability of future storms.

"We all know this is going to happen again," Planthaber said. "I'm most nervous about places that got hit really hard and are very likely to get hit hard again."

About 46% of Americans said they had personally experienced the effects of climate change in a 2021 Yale Program on Climate Change Communication survey, and 65% said they worried about global warming.

As people in some areas feel the threat of severe storms or fires more frequently, Vermeulen and her colleagues have begun discussing how [climate change](#) may be hindering the natural recovery cycle.

"There isn't a chance to regroup and feel safe again, feel like you can let down your vigilance again, and that's exhausting," she said.

For Milholin and her husband, this was the second time they'd been through a major flood: They lost their home to one in 2006. They rebuilt the house, elevated, but it still took on about eight feet of water in September.

"Having done this twice now," said Milholin, 42, of experiencing floods, "it's hard to work through a trauma. I would just personally like to see mental health be part of a disaster emergency response."

Part of the ongoing anxiety, many said, is grappling with the unpredictability of storms and humans' lack of control over what happens—a sense that you need to prepare for something you may not actually be able to prepare for.

The Hermans described a "constant desire" to protect their house and their family—they spent a lot of time thinking about mitigation measures for their property. But it's accompanied by a sense of not quite

knowing what to do.

"When it rains, you just have to live with that fear until that passes," Herman said. "To actually have that huge devastation and to realize that every contractor who came through said, 'Get ready. This is only going to happen more often.'"

Vermeulen recommended that people do as much as possible to prepare—have an evacuation plan, a go bag, and a deadline for deciding whether to evacuate or shelter in place—and then recognize that it's impossible to control what else happens.

"Do everything you can to prepare and then give yourself the credit for that," she said. "Then, [don't] just be focused entirely on the risk. But it is not easy by a long shot."

The night of Ida, Milholin used what she calls her tools to estimate the threat—water gauges along the creek, the National Weather Service, the NOAA website—but even those didn't help this time. Suddenly, the creek level was higher than predicted and just kept rising, she recalled.

"I'm a knowledge-is-power kind of person, so I try to stay on top of it, but I still couldn't prepare last time," Milholin said. "I'm fully aware that it's not [that it] may happen, it's going to happen again."

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