



## After the Hurricanes Have Gone: Stress and Decision Making When Living Alone<sup>1</sup>

---

Carolyn Wilken<sup>2</sup>

The hurricane season has left us all fearful and anxious. The stress levels of many Floridians are up, and people talk about being anxious and afraid. Even though the skies are clear and the threat of another hurricane is remote, we still worry. Because our lives have been turned upside down by the storms we may continue to feel anxious.

This is a particularly difficult time for older adults who live alone. While older adults have family and friends, there are times when making decisions is really hard particularly when you feel like you must do it alone. You may be feeling especially stressed if you are dealing with rebuilding or repairing your home and trying to sort things out with the insurance company.

Many of us play the “what if” game with ourselves:

- What if I make the wrong decision?
- What if someone is taking advantage of me?
- What if I don't have enough money?

- What if . . .

And so we worry. And we feel stressed and anxious. We are anxious because we feel like we must make decisions quickly. It may feel like things are happening that are out of our control. And often we must make decisions regarding things we don't really know about such as roofing materials or insurance clauses. Sometimes we simply wring our hands and wonder what can we do?

This fact sheet offers suggestions on how to control stress by offering a plan to reduce worrying. We can't do anything about the weather, but we can do something to control our worrying. Below are some simple strategies to reduce stress and anxiety. Of course these strategies won't make all the fear go away, but by following these suggestions you can regain control over your life—no matter what your age.

### Do one thing at a time

Do you sometimes have problems finishing things you've started? Is it difficult to concentrate? Do you find yourself constantly drawn to the television to get the latest news. If you find yourself

---

1. This document is FCS9233, one of a series of the Family Youth and Community Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date September 20, 2005. Visit the EDIS Web Site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.  
2. Carolyn S. Wilken, Ph.D., M.P.H., Associate Professor, Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

glued to the TV, you aren't alone. In fact, doing this has become so common that it has a name: the CNN Effect. If continuous news of the storms and rebuilding efforts cause you to worry, watch the news once and then turn it off. Instead, watch something light and entertaining.

Are you so wrapped up in what's happening and the decisions that you must make that you lose track of your usual work and daily tasks? Suddenly you are faced with a mountain of unfinished tasks, and the next thing you know, you are stressed about the things you haven't done.

Specialists suggest that doing one thing at a time, and completing that project before beginning another is a good way to help gain control over stress. Choose one task that needs to be done right away, and do it. Then take on the next task. Checking these things off a list is a great stress reducer.

### **Keep a routine**

One of the most effective ways to reduce stress is to keep your normal routine. It is sometimes hard to do this when you have other things—such as hurricanes—on your mind. Having a routine is a way to maintain control in your life. But stress and anxiety become manageable when you work to control the things you can. Try these tips:

#### 1. Maintain your regular sleep schedule

If you are staying up later than normal to watch the latest news, you may not be getting enough sleep. And, for many people, “watching the war” right before going to bed is like eating spicy food late at night—you just don't sleep very well!

#### 2. Eat regularly and well

During times of stress some people say that they just can't eat while others use eating in an effort to reduce their feelings of stress. Focus on the healthy foods you enjoy, but reconsider any plans to make drastic changes in your eating habits when you are feeling so stressed. In time, we will again feel normal and then we can make such changes.

#### 3. Exercise is a stress-buster

Fresh air and exercise are well known stress busters. Take a walk alone, or better yet with friends. Walking will clear your head and improve your health. People who exercise feel more confident and stronger. And, they sleep better too.

#### 4. Keep your usual schedule

Stick with your regular schedule. If you usually buy groceries on Monday, volunteer on Wednesday, clean on Friday, and attend religious services on Saturday or Sunday, keep it up. Keeping your usual schedule helps you maintain some control in your life and prevents you from becoming obsessed with the storms and their aftermath. People who miss their regular activities because they are worried can easily become isolated, lonely, and in the end, even more stressed and anxious.

### **Maintain contact with friends and family**

After each storm, Floridians jammed the phone lines as they reached out to family and friends. We reached out to be sure that everyone was okay, and we were reaching out to find someone who could tell us that everything was going to be okay. Even after the storms, it is not unusual to still feel somewhat worried about your own safety, and about your friends and loved ones.

#### 1. Keep in touch.

Sharing joys as well as concerns is a great stress reducer. Sometimes talking to people about your fears and concerns really helps. Talking also helps us as we try to make decisions about rebuilding and repairing our homes and lives. Be wary of the “gloomers and doomers” whose negative talk may increase instead of decrease your stress and anxiety. Learn to change the subject (ex., “Have I told you about my grandchildren”?), or walk away if you find a conversation is increasing your stress level.

## 2. Know your neighbors

Many people have close ties and friendships with their neighbors and know each other well enough to be aware of any special needs someone might have. Close neighbors also know who is older, and who is alone.

Unfortunately, in some cases our neighbors are strangers. Now is a good time to get to know your neighbors. It's a time to learn who you can turn to during a time of need, and to let others know that you are available to help as well.

schedules and routines. We must keep in touch with our family and friends. And we can listen to and talk to ourselves about our fears. And finally, we can get help when our stress, anxiety, and worry become more than we can handle. Being alone may be especially hard these days, but taking control wherever we can is a great stress reducer.

## Talk to yourself

### 1. Listen first, then talk to yourself

Gather the information about the decisions that you need to make. Get information and bids for any repair work in writing. Talk to family and friends, read the papers and the internet, and comparison shop. Then, ask someone you trust, a family member or friend to help you sort out your options and make your decision. Once you make your decision tell yourself that you made the decision with the best information you had, and then tell yourself to move forward to the next decision.

### 2. Moving on is the hardest part

Once you've thought this all through and made your decisions it's time to let go. Ask yourself: "Is there anything more I can do"? If you've done all you can, then relax a little and get on with life.

## Conclusion

If you have done everything you can to calm yourself and are still feeling stressed and anxious then you may want to ask a professional for help in finding other ways to reduce your stress. Call your physician, speak with your clergy person, or contact the mental health department for guidance.

This paper offered some suggestions for reducing the stress in our lives. We can focus on doing one thing at a time. We can keep our regular