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[Home](#) > [Displaced by hurricane](#) — Settling into my new home?

Displaced by hurricane — Settling into my new home? ^[1]

Alice,

I am a displaced New Orleans student at my college, and I am still having issues since the hurricane. I have been getting counseling, but it doesn't seem to be helping. I loved my life in New Orleans and at my school. Everyone keeps telling me "to make the best of it," and I'm really trying to. For instance, I try to go to events and meet people. I have been very outgoing and friendly even though I am not a natural extrovert. It takes a lot of energy out of me, and it just doesn't seem to be paying off. I also feel very isolated being around people that don't understand what I'm going through. I've tried to get in contact with other New Orleans students, but I've had difficulties. I feel like I'm going to go crazy being this depressed for another couple of months. Furthermore, I fear that everything will be drastically different when I return to New Orleans, and I'll never get my life back. Also, sometimes I feel guilty feeling sad because my situation could be so much worse. I just don't what else to do!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina can be traumatic events that can have short- and long-term effects for those who go through them. Not only do people experience these events differently, but they also process and grieve in a multitude of ways. Research shows that students displaced by Katrina reported significantly more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than their nondisplaced counterparts. With this in mind, you're not alone in experiencing feelings of sadness, isolation, and anxiety about the future. In fact, research also shows that many of the world's other natural disasters have left people feeling similar ways. Although the process can be painful, reflecting on your loss and reaching out for help are signs that you are, in fact, healing.

Sometimes when people experience a significant loss it can be helpful to understand the grieving process and make sense of their feelings. Grief is an ongoing process that everyone experiences differently. Over time, your feelings may change from sadness and loneliness to anger and resentment and, ultimately, perhaps, to personal resolution. You may even find positive ways to incorporate what seem like negative memories and emotions into your life. In the meantime, there are a variety of practices that may ease your feelings of sadness and provide positive

psychological benefits. Consider the following:

- **Eat healthy:** During times of stress, it can be helpful to maintain a balanced diet and drink plenty of water.
- **Get some rest:** It may feel difficult to find enough time to rest or get adequate sleep. Giving your body and mind a break can boost your ability to cope with stress.
- **Stay connected with family and friends:** Get and give the support you and others need.
- **Be patient with yourself and with those around you:** If you're surrounded by others who have also experienced a natural disaster, consider that everyone is stressed and may need some time to put their feelings and thoughts in order.
- **Set priorities:** Tackle tasks in small steps.
- **Limit your exposure:** To the best of your ability, limit the sights and sounds of disaster, especially on television, the radio, and in newspapers.

List adapted from the [American Red Cross](#) [2].

You may consider other methods of self-care, such as meditation, yoga, or a warm bath to help you relax and feel refreshed. In addition, journaling is an activity you may consider to assist you in exploring your feelings — both negative and positive. In your day-to-day life, it may also be helpful to establish routines that provide a sense of stability and comfort. For example, you might try going to sleep and waking up at similar times each day, or creating small rituals such as going on a morning run or taking care of plants. You might also consider incorporating activities or habits that you enjoyed before the natural disaster into your routine. For instance, if you liked eating breakfast in the cafeteria or dining hall with friends on Sundays, you could try calling a friend to chat while you eat, making it a virtual brunch date from any location.

You mentioned that you've been making an extra effort to be more outgoing. Making friends in a new place can be difficult, and it can be even more challenging to find friends who truly understand the experience of being displaced. Have you considered volunteering to help other displaced people? This may be a meaningful way to meet others who share your experience. In your search for meaningful relationships, you may consider a support group as an addition to your individual counseling.

Although it may seem unusual to feel sad and lonely so long after being displaced, healing does indeed take time. In the face of a natural disaster and the accompanying emotions, you seem to be actively searching for ways to move forward with your life, which shows that you're on the path to recovery. While you've noted that you're receiving counseling, you may also want to check out what other services are available through the mental health services that are available on your campus, such as support groups.

In hope and healing,

Alice!

Category:

[Emotional Health](#) [3]

[Blues & Depression](#) [4]

[Grief & Loss](#) [5]

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[How long does mourning last?](#) [8]

Resources

[Counseling and Psychological Services \(CPS\) \(Morningside\)](#) [9]

[Mental Health Services \(CUIMC\)](#) [10]

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Footer menu

- ▼ [Contact Alice!](#)
 - [Content Use](#)
 - [Media Inquiries](#)
 - [Comments & Corrections](#)
- ▼ [Syndication & Licensing](#)
 - [Licensing Q&As](#)
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 - [Full Site Syndication](#)
 - [Link to Go Ask Alice!](#)

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Links

[1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/displaced-hurricane-%E2%80%94-settling-my-new-home-0>

[2] <https://www.redcross.org/get-help/disaster-relief-and-recovery-services/recovering-emotionally.html>

[3] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/emotional-health>

[4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/blues-depression>

[5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/grief-loss>

[6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/getting-touch-during-emergency-0>

[7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/health-information-online-whom-can-you-trust>

[8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/how-long-does-mourning-last-1>

[9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/counseling-and-psychological-services-cps-morningside>

[10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/mental-health-services-cuimc>