REBUILDING HOPE AFTER A NATURAL DISASTER:
Pathways to Emotional Healing & Recovery
To all those impacted by the central Illinois tornado on November 17, 2013. May your stories bring healing and hope to others.

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TORNADO

Tornado siren,
Family screams,
Loud noises in my dreams.
Dark skies in the afternoon
Make me hide in my room.
I shut my eyes and wait for clear skies.

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BEAU BAILEY
Adolescent Male | Tornado Survivor
East Peoria, Illinois
INTRODUCTION

Don’t forget about us,” were words spoken by tornado survivor, Andrea Bowers, immediately following the central Illinois tornado on November 17, 2013. The foresight of that statement pierces our hearts and causes us to pause, pay attention to the needs of our community members, and do something to help!

Within seconds of the storm, families and neighbors trudged through debris to pull others out from the destruction. Survival instinct surfaced within some, as others remained paralyzed in shock. Parents cradling children, teenagers searching for friends, emergency rescue teams alert and active, shelters available, community leaders launching communication, schools responding, and business, community and faith based organizations serving with open arms – all uniting!

As months have passed since the tornado, our communities continue to unite! Teams of volunteers assist with removal of debris and houses are under construction. Although we gain excitement with the physical rebuilding, we must pay attention to the emotional journey of those whose lives were uprooted that day in November. We see the fear each time the skies darken and winds blow strongly, we hear the cries each time the emergency preparedness sirens sound, and we feel the vulnerability when life’s circumstances seem out of control.

Heart of Illinois United Way (HOIUW) established a Tornado Relief Fund to support the needs of central Illinois in the aftermath of the November 17, 2013 disaster. The HOUW partnered with the Salvation Army and Midwest Food Bank to provide direct assistance for food, shelter, and clothing. In addition, a community-based Post Natural Disaster Committee was formed to identify and respond to local emotional health needs. A recurring need is to provide concise strategies that help survivors with short and long-term calming and coping skills.

The purpose of this book, Rebuilding Hope after a Natural Disaster: Pathways to Emotional Healing and Recovery, is to provide valuable assistance to survivors, caregivers and support groups. Included are personal first-hand experience stories, emotional recovery strategies, and resources for a variety of post-disaster time periods and age groups. Emotional healing looks different for each person. In the recovery process, coping is not ‘one size fits all.’ Strategies can be used to meet individual needs. May this book serve as an effective tool to offer emotional support during the healing process, to help communities recover, and to rebuild hope.

We hear your voice, and we have not forgotten . . .
Have you ever been so stunned that you were frozen in place? It is as if your feet are glued to the pavement, then your stomach drops as the realization of what has happened sets into place. I felt this very sensation on November 17, 2013...

**ELLIE HIPP**  
Teenage Female, Tornado Survivor  
Washington, IL, 11.17.13

I got a glimpse of what it really means to be a neighbor — within seconds of the storm, men were pulling us out from the debris, and we were all gathering in the street counting off to make sure we were all accounted for and safe.

**RACHEL ZWILLING**  
Teenage Female, Tornado Survivor  
Washington, IL, 11.17.13

Some kind neighbors pulled me out of the basement and carried me to the street. I am just so very grateful.

**MARILYN GEE**  
Senior Female, Tornado Survivor  
Washington, IL, 11.17.13

I was on my knees and curled the rest of my body over my newborn daughter. My husband covered my head with his body and wrapped his arm around the heavy shelf next to us. I will never forget what I heard, felt, and saw in that moment. I was numb.

**ANDREA**  
Adult Female, Tornado Survivor  
Washington, IL, 11.17.13

Stunned & Numb
Adult/Caregiver

- Take immediate action to ensure your physical safety and the safety of others.
- Calm yourself by taking a deep breath. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. As you exhale, say, “I can handle this” and “Relax.”
- Seek immediate medical attention if you are experiencing physical health problems.
- Ensure your family members or those around you know your whereabouts. Make a plan for how often you will check in with others, especially if you are leaving the immediate area.
- Designate a “point person,” such as a friend or relative who is capable of coordinating help for housing, donations, or other needs during this time.

Caregivers Helping Children

- Reassure your children that they are safe with you and inform them of specific things you will do to keep them safe over the next several days. It is normal for children to feel confused, disoriented, or scared after a crisis.
- Instruct your children to take deep breaths if they appear panicked. Show them how to inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth. Count as they inhale and coach them to say, “I am okay” or “We will get through this” as they exhale. Try to remain as calm as possible, as your child will model your behaviors.
- Tell your children where you will be at all times. If you are leaving the children with a trusted friend or family member, tell them when you expect to be back and how often you will be checking in with them.
- Provide your young children with a comforting object for them to hold if you can access one. Hug your children frequently and give verbal reassurance.
- Explain to your children what the plan will be at the start of each day. Continue to remind them of the plan throughout the day. Structure and routine can help children feel more secure.

Adolescents/Teenagers

- Take immediate action to ensure your physical safety and the safety of others. Consider safe shelter, water, food and sanitation.
- Listen to and follow emergency procedures. Calm yourself by taking a deep breath. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. As you exhale, say, “I can handle this” and “Relax.”
- Keep focused on the here and now to combat feelings of numbness or troubles with concentration. Think one task at a time, “step by step,” until the task is complete.
- Communicate your location and safety needs to your family.
- Coach yourself to accept that it is okay to “not be okay.” Feeling different emotions is normal after a natural disaster.
You cannot judge or blame anyone for what they say or do after a traumatic experience such as this because everyone copes with it in a different way.

**Jake Clark**  
Teenage Male, Tornado Survivor  
Washington, IL, 11.17.13

Simply doing things in the same order each day repeatedly gives a huge level of comfort and allowed me to cope with the aftermath of the tornado.

**Noah Patton**  
Teenage Male, Tornado Survivor  
Washington, IL, 11.17.13

...the fourth week after the tornado I created an "ugly" journal and a "sunshine" journal. The ugly journal is the one that I wrote in about my frustrations, irritations and unfairness feelings I was experiencing - real or perceived. ... The sunshine journal is a journal of gratitude. It has all the simple gestures and grand donations received from friends, family, the community, complete strangers and God.

**Brenda Smith**  
Adult Female, Tornado Survivor  
Washington, IL, 11.17.13

Going through the Motions
Adult/Caregiver

- Make small choices each day. Take one step at a time. Focus on the "here and now" instead of trying to get everything "taken care of" immediately.

- Follow a structured routine each day that is made up of manageable steps.

- Practice deep breathing, journaling, or saying positive statements to help cope with daily stress. Remember that your feelings are normal and okay. (Think aloud, "I can handle this," "Stay calm," "I will get through this.")

- Accept the feelings and reactions of those close to you, even if they are different than your own. Healing looks different for each person.

- Maintain a connection with family and friends. Ask for their help in problem solving and coping with stress. If others offer help, direct them to your "point person." It’s okay to not have the answers.

- Return to activities that you did with family and friends before the event as soon as possible.

- Practice deep breathing, journaling, or saying positive statements to help cope with daily stress.

- Identify and meet your own needs. Share those needs with people around you. Ask them to give you some "space" if needed; however, avoid "shutting down."

- Stay connected with family and friends to counter any desire to withdraw and isolate. Maintain your support systems of family and friends.

Caregivers Helping Children

- Praise your children for positive behaviors. Use words like, "I saw the way you put on your shoes, zipped your coat, and remembered your book bag. That is helpful." Or, "I heard you ask your sister to play. That is cooperating. Thank you." Remain consistent with family rules, rewards, and consequences that were in place prior to the natural disaster. This will provide your child with a sense of normalcy and encourage positive behaviors.

- Allow your children to engage in calming behaviors typical of a younger child. Behaviors such as thumb-sucking or requesting to be rocked in a chair can be soothing at this time.

- Set a regular bedtime for each night and follow a "bedtime routine." Before bed, engage in a calming routine, such as giving your child a warm bath, reading a story, or singing to help him/her relax.

- Reassure your children in a calming way that they do not need to feel embarrassed or ashamed if they begin to have toileting accidents. Children may wet themselves or the bed more frequently after a natural disaster.

- Limit your child’s exposure to the news or media coverage. If your children want to talk about the situation, allow them to express their feelings. End the conversation in a positive tone by stating ways in which the family is safe, cared for, and healthy.

Adolescents/Teenagers

- Follow a structured routine each day that is made up of small, manageable steps. Prioritize. Think: “What do I need to do first, then next?”

- Return to activities that you did with family and friends before the event as soon as possible.

- Practice deep breathing, journaling, or saying positive statements to help cope with daily stress.

- Identify and meet your own needs. Share those needs with people around you. Ask them to give you some "space" if needed; however, avoid "shutting down."

- Stay connected with family and friends to counter any desire to withdraw and isolate. Maintain your support systems of family and friends.
Cleaning up the damage was definitely eye-opening, but the most life-changing part of it all was watching the owners of all the homes and how they reacted... they looked at it from the perspective that they were absolutely blessed to be alive and to be together.

**Drake Jackson**
Teenage Male, Tornado Survivor
Washington, IL, 11.17.13

I just felt numb, and then I was angry and depressed for a while... I finally felt the pain I was holding in - it helped me heal... Now I am able to see that good things are coming as a result of it.

**Megan Cook**
Teenage Female, Tornado Survivor
East Peoria, IL, 11.17.13

Although the harsh realities of the aftermath cut deep into the hearts of so many, there are lessons of hope that can be shared with the intention of bringing a sense of healing and restoration in the chaos.

**Lydia Puentes**
Teenage Female, Tornado Survivor
Washington, IL, 11.17.13

Adjusting to Change
**Adolescents/Teenagers**

- Remember that in times of distress, it is okay to “not be okay.” If you are experiencing feelings of sadness, anger, or anxiety, do not be afraid to tell someone with whom you trust.
- Take care of your body. Try to get at least eight hours of sleep every night. Walk or jog outside, exercise, or play sports with friends for at least thirty minutes a day.
- Write down your thoughts and feelings. This can be especially helpful if you have trouble sleeping or you wake from a troubling dream.
- Identify unhealthy thoughts (i.e. “My life is ruined”). Try to identify reasons why those thoughts may not be true. Create healthy replacement thoughts (i.e. “I will build a new future”).
- Rely on your friends and family for social support. Join a team, club, or reconnect with hobbies you used to enjoy.

**Caregivers Helping Children**

- Encourage open expression of feelings through talking, playing, and drawing. Let your child know that his/her feelings are okay. Increase your child’s comfort level through additional attention, verbal assurance, physical comfort such as hugs, and provide a comforting item such as a teddy bear or blanket.
- Teach your child coping strategies such as deep breathing, writing/drawing, and outdoor play/exercise. These strategies can assist in coping with feelings such as anxiety, fear, sadness, and anger.
- Provide a structured routine so your child knows what to expect. Have a regular wake time, bedtime, and try to schedule meals, activities, and chores. Resume your child’s typical routine as soon as possible.
- Provide the opportunity for your child to participate in decisions such as how to decorate or redecorate his or her room. Decision-making can provide your child with a sense of accomplishment and purpose in situations that may feel “out of control.”
- Provide your child with opportunities to participate in enjoyable activities and spend time with family and friends.

**Adult/Caregiver**

- Talk about your feelings. If you find yourself not sleeping, short of temper, or have trouble concentrating, this is not unusual. It is okay to “not be okay.” It can be helpful to share feelings of sadness, anger, or anxiety with someone you trust.
- Meet your physical needs. Try to get an adequate amount of sleep, eat healthy, and engage in some physical activity on a daily basis.
- Write down or draw your thoughts and feelings. This can be especially helpful if you have trouble sleeping or you wake from a troubling dream.
- Identify unhealthy thoughts (i.e. "I will always be afraid"). Try to identify reasons why those thoughts may not be true. Create healthy replacement thoughts (i.e. "I may feel afraid now, but my fear will lessen over time").
- Seek assistance and support from peers, family members, and community groups. Attend community gatherings, prayer meetings, town hall meetings, or other events that will allow you to reconnect with neighbors and friends.
- Talk about your feelings. If you find yourself not sleeping, short of temper, or have trouble concentrating, this is not unusual. It is okay to “not be okay.” It can be helpful to share feelings of sadness, anger, or anxiety with someone you trust.
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- Seek assistance and support from peers, family members, and community groups. Attend community gatherings, prayer meetings, town hall meetings, or other events that will allow you to reconnect with neighbors and friends.
Some of the biggest lessons I have learned from the tornado are that everyone handles it differently, people do not always know the right thing to say, and people really come together in a time of grief.

EMMA MICHIEFIELDER
Teenage Female, Tornado Survivor
East Peoria, IL, 11.17.13

When the winds of change blow in your direction it should not be your goal to stand against them and cling so tightly to the past, as it should be to embrace the new future.

JACOB SPRING
Teenage Male, Tornado Survivor
Washington, IL, 11.17.13

I have realized how much my family and friends mean to me. I've learned about the small victories and have seen how a community has joined together.

KELsie
Teenage Female, Tornado Survivor
Metamora, IL, 11.17.13

The tornado taught me to be more thankful for all the people, opportunities, and things I have in my life – to be more willing to help others, and the power of community that joins together in times of need can do wondrous things.

CONNOR
Teenage Male, Tornado Survivor
Washington, IL, 11.17.13
**Adolescents/Teenagers**

- Participate in activities you enjoyed prior to the natural disaster or find new hobbies.
- Set realistic goals for the future. Do things that help you recharge. This can help give you a sense of accomplishment and purpose in situations that may feel “out of control.”
- Define your “new normal.” Life will look different in some ways after a disaster than it did before. Each evening, write one new thing that felt “right” or “amazing” that day.
- Talk with friends, family, and other supports. Be specific and honest about your feelings. Re-engage with activities you enjoyed previously, such as going out to dinner, taking walks, listening to music, watching a movie, etc.
- Model healthy coping skills for your children. Eat healthy, get enough rest, exercise, stay connected with others, journal, and take a deep breath when you need to calm yourself. Seek help if you have ongoing feelings of anxiety. By doing so, you show your child that it’s okay to ask for help when life is hard.

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**Caregivers Helping Children**

- Engage your children in activities and play dates with their peers. It is important for the child to have a positive outlet and opportunity to socialize with others.
- Talk to your children about their feelings and fears. If children appear to be “stuck” in the past encourage them to talk to a trusted adult, draw pictures about how they feel, or write about their feelings in a journal. Younger children may act out their emotions through play.
- Help your children define a “new normal.” If your children are focused on talking about how things “used to be,” help them name new things that are good/positive each day. Write them on pieces of paper and place them in a clear jar. Watch them increase with each new day.
- Plan family fun nights where the entire family can participate in a relaxing activity. It is healthy for the whole family as a group to engage in positive and relationship-building activities.
- Model healthy coping skills for your children. Eat healthy, get enough rest, exercise, stay connected with others, journal, and take a deep breath when you need to calm yourself. Seek help if you have ongoing feelings of anxiety. By doing so, you show your child that it’s okay to ask for help when life is hard.

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**Caregivers Helping Adults/Caregivers**

- Participate in activities you enjoyed prior to the natural disaster or find new hobbies.
- Set realistic goals for the future. Do things that help you recharge. This can help give you a sense of accomplishment and purpose in situations that may feel “out of control.”
- Define your “new normal.” Life will look different in some ways after a disaster than it did before. Record highlights from each new day. Try to incorporate those highlights into a daily routine (i.e. “We now take time each evening as a family to share positive things that happen each day. This routine makes us feel connected and grateful at the end of the day”).
- Focus on your strengths and past accomplishments. Write them down. Reread them. This strategy will help you remain positive.
- Keep lines of communication open with loved ones. Be specific and honest about your feelings and needs. Take time to reflect, journal, meditate or pray.
- Participate in activities you enjoyed prior to the natural disaster or find new hobbies.
- Set realistic goals for the future. Do things that help you recharge. This can help give you a sense of accomplishment and purpose in situations that may feel “out of control.”
- Define your “new normal.” Life will look different in some ways after a natural disaster than it did before. Each evening, write one new thing that felt “right” or “amazing” that day.
- Talk with friends, family, and other supports. Be specific and honest about your feelings. Re-engage with activities you enjoyed previously, such as going out to dinner, taking walks, listening to music, watching a movie, etc.
- Model healthy coping skills for your children. Eat healthy, get enough rest, exercise, stay connected with others, journal, and take a deep breath when you need to calm yourself. Seek help if you have ongoing feelings of anxiety. By doing so, you show your child that it’s okay to ask for help when life is hard.
The hope of this book is to offer strategies for recovering from a natural disaster. At any point during the recovery process, if symptoms significantly interfere with your ability to function in a healthy manner, seek professional help.

**Ask for help if you are experiencing one or more of the following:**

- [ ] Are not able to take care of yourself or your children.
- [ ] Are not able to do your job.
- [ ] Use alcohol or drugs to get away from your problems.
- [ ] Feel sad or depressed for more than two weeks.
- [ ] Have thoughts about suicide or any type of self harm.
- [ ] Experience increased feelings of verbal or physical aggression toward others.
- [ ] Experience ongoing panic attacks, flashbacks, nightmares, or are unable to calm down.

**Adults**

helpguide.org

SEARCH: Traumatic Stress
- How to Recover from Disasters and Other Traumatic Events
- Coping with Grief and Loss

Suggestions on how to recover from disasters and other traumatic events from Helpguide.org – an ad-free non-profit resource for supporting better mental health and lifestyle choices for adults and children.

**APA**

SEARCH: Natural Disasters
- Recovering Emotionally from Disaster
- Managing Traumatic Stress: After a Tornado

American Psychological Association’s guide for recovering emotionally from disaster.

**Illinois Lawyer Finder**

SEARCH: Disaster Preparedness
- Disaster Preparedness Checklist and Handbook
- Disaster Legal Services Manual
- Replacing Documents Lost in a Disaster
- Natural Disasters: Social Security and Banking Issues

Illinois State Bar Association’s Legal Resources: Disaster Preparedness

Reprinted with Permission of the Illinois State Bar Association

**Mental Health Answers**

SEARCH: Traumatic Stress
- Dealing with Stress after a Natural Disaster

Mental Health America’s Pikes Peak region information on common reactions after a natural disaster and tips for coping.

**NCTSN**

SEARCH: Parent Guidelines for Helping Children After a Tornado
- Parents_talk_to_children_about_tornadoes.pdf

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s suggestions for families dealing with the aftermath of a tornado.

**211**

CALL 211: For immediate attention
GO ONLINE: For more information

Connects callers to critical health and human care programs in central Illinois.
Children

zerotothree.org
SEARCH: Little Listeners in an Uncertain World
> Open pdf: Little Listeners in an Uncertain World
> Title: Little Listeners in an Uncertain World: Coping strategies for you and your young child after traumatic events

Zero to Three article detailing ways to help young children after a traumatic event.

portal.lifeworks.com
SEARCH: Helping Young Children Cope After a Natural Disaster
> Title: Helping Young Children Cope After a Natural Disaster
> PDF version

Ceridian Corporation’s article on how to help young children cope after a natural disaster.

naeyc.org
SEARCH: Coping with Disasters
> Scroll down and click on Coping with Disasters
> Scroll to: Talking to Children about Disasters
> Open link: Tips for Talking to Children and Youth after Traumatic Events: A Guide for Parents and Educators

National Association for Education of Young Children’s resources for helping young children to cope with disasters.

ucsfchildcarehealth.org
SEARCH: Young Children and Disasters
> Scroll to Google link: Young Children and Disasters – California Childcare Health Program
> Title: Young Children and Disasters

Health and Safety suggestions from the California Childcare Health Program.

Adolescents & Teens

fema.gov
SEARCH: Coping with Disaster
> Scroll down and open link for FEMA: Coping with Disaster
> Scroll down to Easing Disaster-Related Stress and Helping Kids Cope with Disaster

Federal Emergency Management Agency’s suggestions for managing after a disaster - guidelines for multiple age categories.

nctsn.org
SEARCH: Tornadoes
> Open toolbar for Recovery: Scroll down and open the following PDF links:
> Tornado Response for Kids: Right after a Tornado
> Tornado Recovery for Kids: Making Things Better
> Tornado Response for Teens: Right after a Tornado
> Tornado Recovery for Teens: Making Things Better

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s suggestions for dealing with the aftermath of a tornado.

nimh.nih.gov
SEARCH: Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disaster: What Parents Can Do
> Open link: NIMH-Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence . . .

National Institute of Mental Health’s guide for parents to help their children and adolescents cope with violence and disasters.

Find these resources at:
hoiunitedway.org/tornado relief
Contact your local United Way for additional resources.
Living Through the Storm

ANDREA’S Story

FIRST 72 HOURS
We had no idea the tornado was coming that day. We don’t really listen to or watch the news, and the TV was tuned to a satellite channel, not a local channel that would have alerted us to the weather that morning. I was getting ready to go to a baby shower. I just got my ten-week old daughter, Sydney, out of the bathtub, dressed her, and handed her to my husband, Ryan. I then went back to our bathroom to get ready, and I heard a faint, constant rumbling in the distance but didn’t think much of it. I heard our dogs barking so I went to let them in the house before I got in the shower. It felt very bizarre outside for November. A wave of humidity hit me as soon as I opened the door, and I could feel the moisture on my skin almost immediately. After I let the dogs in I went to get in the shower when the weather app on my phone sounded. The app alerted us to the current weather emergency. It stated that Washington was in the path of a tornado at 11:05 a.m. I told Ryan that we should get in the basement. The thought that went through my mind was, “We have a baby now so we need to be responsible.” I was only wearing a hoodie, yoga pants and no shoes since I was getting ready to take a shower.

Once Sydney, Ryan, our two dogs, and I were in the basement, the sirens went off. Ryan kept going upstairs to check on things. He grabbed a blanket for Sydney, turned off the T.V. and the dryer. On his final trip upstairs he went outside and saw the tornado approaching our neighborhood and our home. Ryan came back downstairs in a hurry. With a look of fear in his eyes I had never seen before he said, “Andrea, it’s not going to be good.” Just then our ears popped as if we were descending in a plane, and the basement windows shattered. I immediately thought back to what I was taught in school during a tornado drill, and I got as low as I could to the basement floor and the wall. I was on my knees and curled the rest of my body over my daughter. Ryan covered my head with his body and wrapped his arm around the heavy shelf next to us. We no more than hit the ground when it began to literally rain debris. Bursts of what felt like tiny pellets stung when they hit my skin.

The only sound I can recall is one that would be best described as a loud jet engine. It felt like between the wind and the roaring I was standing behind a jet ready to take off at the airport. As soon as I had a negative thought it was wiped away. Anyone who knows me would know that this is huge because I am not normally a calm person, especially in this type of situation. The only explanation I have for this is that God. I felt even though it was complete chaos around us, we were protected and wrapped in His arms. At that moment, I felt calm, and a sense of peace washed over me. It was over in a matter of seconds, but it felt as if time stood still while it was happening.

Before we knew it we were partially buried beneath the pieces of what was our first home. After we collected ourselves we then realized we had to find a way out of the situation and get our daughter to safety. Ryan uncovered himself and climbed out. I will never forget looking up and seeing his reaction to the devastation. He began yelling for help to get my daughter and I out of the basement. A gentleman who was in town for a funeral was staying at our neighbor’s house. Ryan had just spoken with him the day before the tornado. He heard Ryan’s cry for help, trudged through the rubble, and we passed Sydney up to him. Ryan then helped me climb out.

I will never forget what I heard, felt and saw in that moment. I was numb. It was the most eerie silence I have ever experienced, littered with sirens in the distance and screams of my trapped and distraught neighbors. The smell of natural gas was so strong I could taste it. It was gone. Everything was gone. Our neighborhood and our house were piles of rubble. Standing on what was the foundation of our home, I could see the trail of devastation. The sky was looking black again. Power lines and debris covered the road. We had to walk for about two blocks to find a house in which to seek shelter.

Once we arrived at shelter we found several of our neighbors, their children and pets huddled in their basement. I asked to borrow a cell phone since I could not call out. I wanted to call my parents, who live in a nearby town, to let them know we were alright and to come and get us. All I could utter when I heard my mom’s voice was, “It’s all gone! Please come get us!” When my parents arrived they couldn’t find our house. Nothing was recognizable due to the piles of debris and destruction. I could hear my mother screaming for us two blocks away. I knew it was her voice. When I finally saw my parents they looked to be holding up my husband, and they were all clearly in shock. Ryan had gone back to search for our dog and help neighbors. Our dog, Winnie, appeared to be fine; however, we could not find our other dog, Max, anywhere.

Physically, I had been hit in the lower back pretty hard with some unknown object. Ryan hurt his foot and something hit his head. Sydney slept through the whole thing. We were in good shape considering what we had been through, but we still needed to seek medical attention. A total stranger took my daughter, mom and me to the ER. My dad and Ryan initially stayed behind to look for Max and help neighbors but joined us in the ER shortly afterwards. Ryan received a phone call that our dog, Max, had been found almost three miles away at an apartment complex. The only explanation for this is that he was carried by the tornado. Max is a fifteen-year-old beagle basset with severe arthritis. He could not have climbed out of that basement alone, yet alone make it three miles through debris within an hour!

I wasn’t prepared for what we saw when we arrived at the ER. I was shocked at all of the debris. It was all over the hallways from people’s bodies and clothing. Physically, Sydney, Ryan and I checked out fine and were sent home. Thankfully, my wonderful coworker met us at the ER with a car seat and baby supplies so we could take care of Sydney for the night and get her to my parent’s home safely. We were exhausted and dirty. I had fiberglass insulation under my clothes. While taking a shower, black dirt from my ears and hair rolled off of my body. I had to dig small pebbles out of my scalp. I did not sleep that first night. I was numb.

The next few days I felt mentally fine. However, my body told a different story. I was sick to my stomach constantly and felt shaky as if I had too much caffeine. Battling my physical reaction, we had to take first steps to make our total loss claim at our local insurance agency. The insurance company had no electrical power; it was dark and cold in their office. The representative for our insurance company took our claim using pen, paper and a cell phone.

The next few days were spent in a race against time and weather to salvage what we could from our property. I couldn’t stop to think about what I was actually doing, so I pretended I was on some sort of treasure hunt. I would get so excited when I found a keepsake that I could hardly contain myself. As the first 72 hours post-tornado came to a close I was left with so many questions for which I had no answers. I was worried about what the future would hold for my family.

Andrea
BRENDA'S Story

Living Through the Storm

FIRST 3-6 V
I was just going through the motions...get up, shower, get dressed, have breakfast, go to work, fix dinner, rinse and repeat. The most striking memories I have of the weeks following the tornado are those of what I call “public crying.” Simple things. The first time was shopping at an unfamiliar grocery store in a town in which our family had to relocate. I could not find the bread...this was “the slap in the face” that things were and are different. The blessing was a simple gesture of the clerk grasping my hand as she handed me my receipt. She understood, and she accepted me for me at my point in healing.

The second public crying was at church during the prayer of the Our Father. This was the prayer I prayed like an auctioneer as I held my daughter during those terrifying moments...this was “the slap in the face” that life indeed could have ended for any one of us. This was the close call that all the planning and preparing could not prevent. This was the realization that we cannot be in control of everything. I learned that knowing this and experiencing this are two completely different things.

I began two journals about the fourth week after the tornado. Journaling was natural to me but my natural was new, and it took a suggestion from a therapist for me to take action. I created an “ugly” journal and a “sunshine” journal. The ugly journal is the one that I wrote in about my frustrations, irritations and unfairness feelings I was experiencing - real or perceived. This is the journal that I would write in but would not go back and re-read. The sunshine journal is a journal of gratitude. It has all the simple gestures and grand donations received from friends, family, the community, complete strangers and God. I have made this a daily routine to write at night and read in the morning.

During this time, my family cocooned. We did not engage in social media very often, we stopped the local paper and did not watch the nightly news. The visual replaying of the event was especially daunting and emotionally traumatic for each of us. We had to disengage from re-enacting “this event” in order to make it through each day.

Brenda Smith
RACHEL'S Story
Living Through the Storm
3-6 MONTH
As a senior in high school, I was having the year of my life. I knew I was lucky to have my family, friends, and a nice house, but looking back I know I did not fully appreciate how amazing my life was. It only took 30 seconds for me to understand that life is not about the material items we have, but about the people with whom we have to share them.

I remember that moment like it was yesterday. The sound, that of a train or helicopter, the debris of brick falling on top of us, and the thought of impending death that raced through my mind. Seconds after the tornado hit our home, I looked up where my ceiling had once been and saw instead a grayish-blue sky above me.

Minutes, hours, even days later, it was still hard for me to believe what happened. The little town I had grown up with was broken, damaged, and unrecognizable. It hurt my heart to see the ruin and know that so many people’s lives were changed forever. For me personally, the healing process has been fairly easy, and I owe it all to my family and friends. The day after the storm we had many groups of family, friends, and coworkers helping us to gather whatever possible of our house. I went in thinking that we would not be able to save anything. I was “okay” with losing clothes, toys, and materials items, but it was the pictures, the teddy bear my deceased grandpa gave me, and the necklace passed down from my mother that I missed the most.

Almost 6 months after the tornado, I am starting to really feel whole again, and things are finally starting to get back to normal. I have learned so much from this storm and as a result have grown into a young adult. The most important lesson I learned as a result of this incident was that of hope, faith, and community.

**Hope.** I see it every day driving through town seeing walls slowly go up and hearing nails hammered into place. The city is buzzing with people and trucks all working to put back together the town one nail at a time.

**Faith.** I now have a new appreciation and trust in my fellow humans. With all the outpouring of love given to us by strangers, I have a renewed faith in people. The world can be a scary place, but I believe that there are still people out there who truly care about others.

**Community.** I always dreamed of growing up and moving away from this small town. However, after seeing the way the people of the community came together I have never been more proud to be a Washington Panther.

I know this healing process is far from over and our house is far from being rebuilt, but this whole experience made me realize that our lives are more than just the material items we own. Life is about living in the moment and being thankful for what we have. Even though the tornado took away everything I owned, I still felt like I had everything I needed. I have a family that cares about me, friends who are always there for me, and memories that no one can take away from me. I refuse to use the phrase, “I am homeless.” Instead I say, “I am houseless.” A house is structure like walls, nails, and insulation. A home is memories, family and love; that is something no amount of force can take away.

Rachel Zwilling
NOAH’S Story

Living Through the Storm
A tornado is perhaps one of the most traumatic events anyone can go through in a lifetime. After a tornado hit my hometown, it wasn’t the immediate chaos that was the problem. It was the days, weeks, and months following. How do you deal with the realization that your house, town, or community has been destroyed? There’s an immense level of stress, anxiety, and depression that can occur. It’s dangerous to let those emotions simply sit and fester. In my experience, I learned several ways to deal with the emotions from communicating, establishing routines, and giving help to others.

Communicating is, in my opinion, the best method you can do to cope with the situation. Whether it is talking to a family member, friend, or even just writing it down in a diary, communicating your experience is very healthy. It helps you reflect back on events, take stock of what has happened, and work through it all. For me, the best course of action was to talk to friends who weren’t directly involved in the disaster. I was able to release some of my emotions, my anger, sadness, and anxiety that had been building up since the tornado. Once I had communicated my emotions through my experience, they didn’t instantly return within me. Granted, I still felt some sadness and some anxiety, but it was marginal compared to how I was feeling emotionally prior to sharing. Seriously, just simply talking to someone is perhaps the best way to cope. It helped me immensely, more than words can describe.

One of the things I have, and I’m sure you have, is a routine. For me, it was fairly standard: Get up, go to school, come home, do homework, watch TV, go to bed. There might have been some variation day-to-day, but at the most basic level, that was my routine day in and day out. Obviously, when the tornado happened, that routine ceased to function. Our school shut down. I had to leave my house. I no longer had a daily routine. It was discomforting not doing everything the same way I had been doing for years. This is why one of the first things I did after the tornado within the first two weeks was to re-establish some sort of routine. Simply doing things in the same order each day repeatedly gave a huge level of comfort and allowed me to cope with the aftermath of the tornado. I don’t know why establishing a routine is so effective at coping, perhaps it is because we are naturally creatures of habit, but whatever the reason it worked for me, and it will work for you. Even if you aren’t living in the same place or going to the same school, you can still establish a routine. Set your alarm for the same time each day. Take a walk every morning. Go to bed at the same time daily. These simple routines can help you cope.

In the aftermath of a tornado, it may be hard to help others, depending on your situation. However, if you’re able, I highly recommend that you take the time out of your day to help others. When you are able to help others, there’s a sense of control that can’t be ignored. Helping others made me feel good about myself and in control of my life, if only for a short while. It’s a small way to work through the tornado and help your community in the process.

Helping others in your community, re-establishing some kind of routine, and communicating your experience with others are all coping strategies I used to deal with the aftermath of the tornado that hit my hometown. Hopefully, you can use these strategies in your own daily life to deal with the stress, anxiety, and frustrations. A tornado is a traumatic event, a disaster unlike anything a person will likely ever face again in his or her life. Do not just assume everything will be okay and that nothing will change. Deal with the stress. Letting the emotions eat up inside of you is a disaster waiting to happen. Cope, using the same strategies I used, and make yourself all the better for it.

Noah Patton
I believe you’ll outlive this pain in your heart and you’ll gain such a strength from what is tearing you apart,” Sara Groves, music artist, proclaimed in her song entitled, It’s Gonna Be Alright. The lyrics of this song bring a powerful message to the communities around the country that have been affected by a tragedy of some kind - specifically the recent outbreak of harsh tornadoes that have brought an immense amount of hardship and struggle into many lives. Although the harsh realities of the aftermath cut deep into the hearts of so many, there are lessons of hope that can be shared with the intention of bringing a sense of healing and restoration in the chaos. The truths that stood out to me the greatest were that hope is a choice that encompasses many facets, good things come from these experiences, and that hope should ultimately be found in the meaningful, eternal aspects of life.

I believe that hope is a choice that can be either embraced or rejected. Through such a great amount of tragedy, hope remains and hope endures. This conviction does not derive from my own personal thoughts, but rather from watching the lives of inspirational people in the world who have chosen to believe in the idea of hope through difficult situations. For example, Bethany Hamilton, professional surfer and successful inspirational speaker, overcame a monumental tragedy in her life. At the age of 13, an almost-deadly shark attack resulted in her losing her left arm. She was back on her surfboard one month later, and two years after that, she won first place in the Explorer Women’s Division of the NSSA National Championships*. Bethany Hamilton’s determination and willingness to “rebuild” her life, in the same likeness of the communities affected by the storms, led to greater success than she could have ever imagined. Her undoubtable hope allowed her to push past the difficulty in her life and believe that a bright future awaited her. Our communities, although devastated and probably feeling hopeless, have the opportunity to feel hopeful and believe that they can rebuild and press on towards the final result of full restoration.

Positive results can come from these hardships. Although it may be a challenge to believe that anything positive or noteworthy could arise from destroyed homes and loved ones who passed away, it is surely not impossible. A positive outlook on these situations allows people to become stronger and grow in their belief in hope. I was able to witness countless numbers of people assisting their neighbors, families, and friends immediately following the tornado in Washington, Illinois, my hometown. The love and care that was displayed that dark, tragic afternoon shed light on the darkness and was a beautiful scene to witness. I have never felt such a sense of community and strength in my eight years of living in Washington.

During times of hardship, there is the ability to discover opportunities to serve others and make a positive difference, no matter the scale of destruction. Throughout the halls of Washington Community High School, the youth of Washington displayed such a great amount of love and kindness as well. Knowing that students of different social statuses, races, and family structures were affected by the tornado truly united the student body in a way that would have probably never happened if not for the storms. Numerous donations were made to support the students whose families did not have sufficient insurance and were displaced. Schools around the area also contributed water bottles and gave other monetary donations. The event of the storms was completely tragic; yet students saw the hope and good that could come from making the best of the present situation.

Another lesson of hope that stood out to me was the realization that life is temporary. The meaningful aspects of life, such as family, friends, and personal faith should be where our ultimate hope is placed. The recent tornadoes have brought trials and sadness into the lives of many, yet a sense of hope can still be discovered through the lessons learned in the process.

The lessons of hope that I have learned in the process of witnessing my town being destroyed and then rebuilt are that hope is a choice that includes many facets. Although my town of Washington, Illinois, may never be exactly the same as it was before the tornado on November 17, 2013, it will forever be my hometown of hope. I believe that hope can be seen fresh in the eyes of the survivors and those who were affected in any way, physically or emotionally. There is hope in my town among the people and there is hope waiting to be brought out in the late April 2014 tornadoes that affected communities in Arkansas, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Iowa. Hope remains when the world crashes down around us. No natural disaster can destroy the hope that is everlasting.

Lydia Puentes

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