

# After the storm: delayed stress

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Salley Miller thought she was holding up pretty well in the months after the Jan. 3-5 storm destroyed her garage, swept away many of her belongings and brought mudslides down on either side of her Happy Valley home.

But as the first sprinkles of the rainy season fell recently, Miller found herself waking up in the middle of the night feeling anxious and crying for hardly any reason.

She is a victim of what experts call "delayed stress syndrome" or "post traumatic stress syndrome," a condition that hits ususally six to nine months after a person has suffered a tragedy.

But there's hope for people like Miller through a free service called Project COPE — Counseling Ordinary People in Emergency.

Project COPE is a joint effort of the county Mental Health Department and privately-licensed counselors. The free counseling it provides to victims of the Jan. 3-5 storm is made possible by a \$132,000 federal grant.

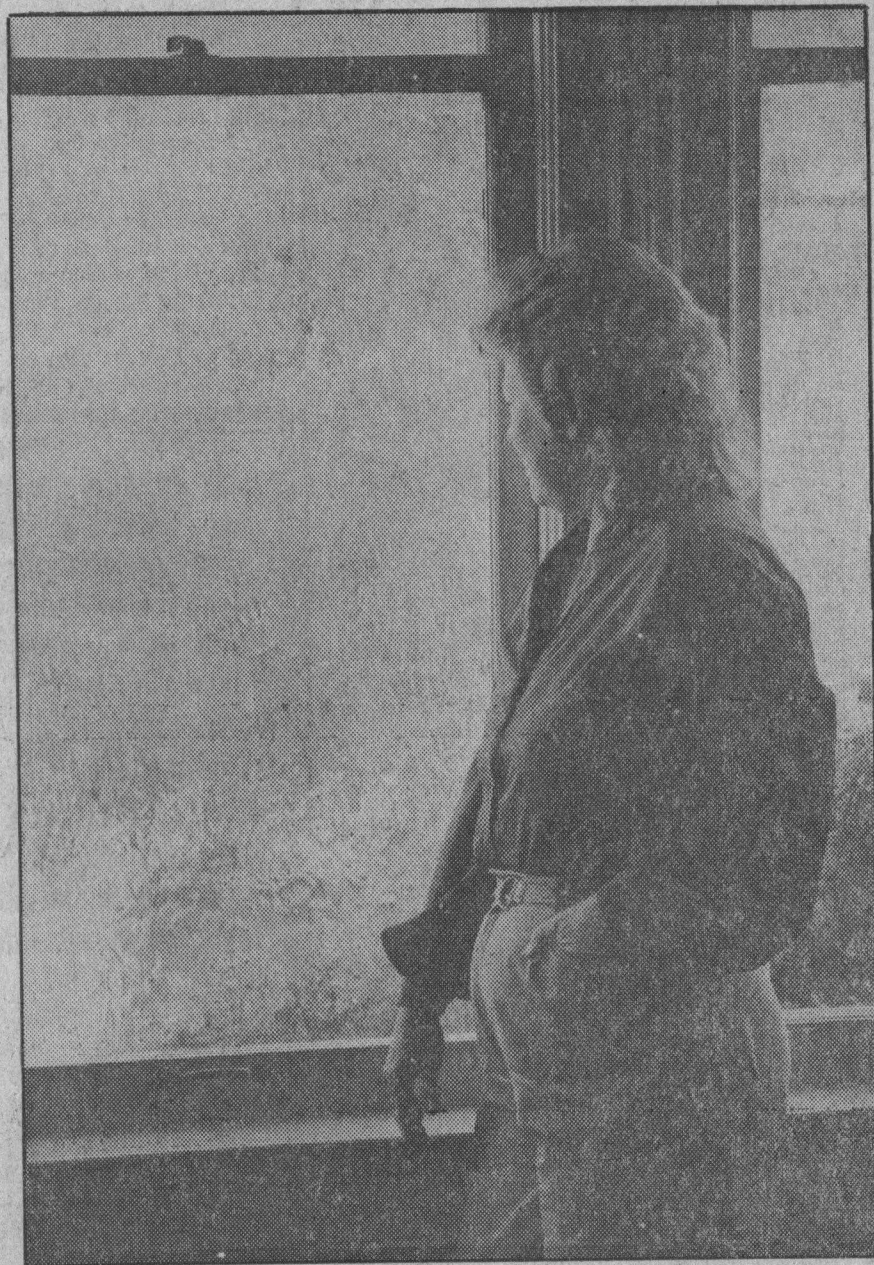
The three counselors with Project COPE — Paul Bellina, Ted Whiteneck and Sue Ritter-Splain — know for a fact that delayed stress syndrome is starting to raise its ugly head. In just the last few weeks, their caseloads have increased noticeably, they said.

"It's very common for this to occur," Bellina explained. "It takes about six to nine months for people to realize that things have set in and they still have to deal with bureacracies that sometimes are more of a hinderance than a help.

"Some of what we're dealing with is a lot of frustration with government agencies. For instance, the county promised they would relax the process to get a building permit and people have found that it's actually become more strict."

Because it has been some time now since the storm, people may be experiencing delayed stress syndrome and not realize their symptoms are related to the storm.

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

*Sally Miller has bitter memories of the rain*

# Delayed stress

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Bellina said that the symptoms include anxiety, depression, irritability, sleeplessness, loss of concentration, loss of appetite, loss of desire for sex and physical complaints.

"There are a wide range of symptoms that are really very normal to experience and will disappear in time," Bellina explained.

"Time is a great healer and so is talking to the person," he added. "Also if the person is stuck in a depressed state, we try new things and try to jog the depression away."

"Right now, the rains are just beginning and people are feeling very, very anxious," Bellina continued. "Some haven't been able to get the bureaucracy to move fast enough and their houses may fall with the next rain. Soquel Creek hasn't been all cleared out. There's a lot of things that haven't been done."

Delayed stress syndrome doesn't just hit adults, but can affect children too, Bellina pointed out.

"Kids tend to exhibit regressive behavior. They begin wetting the bed, clinging to their parents, having nightmares and night terrors," he said.

Realizing that teachers may have problems with some students during rainy school days, Project COPE counselors are putting together a packet of helpful information that will be available to schools.

This packet will list the symptoms teachers should look for in children, include tips on how to educate parents about what they can do, and information on how to detect when a child needs professional care.

A person didn't necessarily have to experience a major tragedy during the storm to now be having storm-related psychological problems, Bellina said.

Some people who were virtually untouched by the storm may now be experiencing what's known as "survivors' guilt."

"The vast majority were unaffected and didn't suffer any severe physical loss," Bellina noted. "A real common situation is people feeling guilty that they didn't receive some loss."

Project COPE also is there to help those experiencing survivors' guilt.

Miller said she first heard about Project COPE in a letter all storm victims were sent this summer.

But at the time, when the weather was warm and the storm seemed like something of the past, she set the letter aside and forgot about it.

But when she realized that she was experiencing problems due to her fear of rain, she called her minister at the United Methodist Church who put her in touch with Project COPE.

"It was just about a month ago that I realized what was happening to me," she said. "I do a lot of self-analysis. I felt this

way always after a storm and I panic whenever I even think of rain."

Miller, an experienced counselor herself who works with cancer patients with the American Cancer Society, admitted that she probably could have handled her problems on her own, but decided counseling was a quicker and easier way out.

"Sure, I can handle it, but if there's a place where you can get support, then you can have someone help you handle it and help you make the right decisions. Paul (Bellina) has been great," she stated.

Bellina, Miller said, is helping her handle some of the more minor problems in her life so that she can have the time and energy to concentrate on the major remodeling job she must do at her home.

She said one of her biggest concerns at the moment is over how she is going to pay the \$200 a month payments on the loan she received for the remodeling job.

"The reality of it is that it's \$200 a month . . . which is another big payment. How am I going to cover it? Big deal if the interest rate is only 8 percent," she said.

But Bellina and Project COPE are helping her cope with some of these problems that she faces.

"It's giving me a centering, a point in time to hang on to until I see him. As things stack up during the week, I know I can go to him at my appointed time and just dump.

"I've been going to counseling and doing counseling for years, so I know the value of it. It's not like you always need it, but when you do, it's great," she said, smiling through her tears.

Anyone who feels they may be going through the same thing Miller is experiencing, or who believes their children might be suffering storm-related trauma or who may be a victim of survivors' guilt can reach Project COPE by calling 425-0827 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays or 425-2237 at night or on weekends.