

## The Oil Spill's Psychological Toll

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Since the beginning of the oil spill—70 days ago, unbelievably—most of the focus has been on the environmental damage. That makes sense—this is the biggest environmental disaster the U.S. has ever faced, almost certainly, and Louisiana's oiled brown pelicans and crude-soaked marshes have emerged as the symbols of the spill. Even the secondary storyline—the damage to fishing livelihoods in the Gulf—is essentially an environmental story as well, for the obvious reasons that seafood depends on a healthy sea. Contaminate the rich coastal ecosystems of the Gulf, poison the deep water with dispersants—and fishing will suffer.



But there are growing fears about the spill's impact on human health—both the 34,000 workers and volunteers cleaning the oil, and on coastal residents who will be living with the disaster for months or longer. Today the Institute of Medicine, a respected nonpartisan Washington nonprofit, held the first day of a [two-day workshop on the health impacts of the spill](#), with testimony from epidemiologists, public health experts and disaster specialists from around the country who'd convened on New Orleans with just two weeks notice. One of the biggest concerns from the researchers is over the lack of transparency in data gathering on the health impacts, [as Businessweek wrote](#):

There are “large gaps” in data now being gathered on the health of the 34,000 workers cleaning up the largest oil spill in U.S. history and growing concern that BP Plc will fail to publicize problems if they arise.

Linda McCauley, dean of the Emory University's school of nursing in Atlanta, said, “It's kind of scary” that the cleanup workers are hired by “the people who are actually at fault” and not the local government, “where we know there can be transparency.”

Tomorrow we'll be covering the rest of the meeting and the larger health effects, both for spill workers and the community. But even before epidemiologists and toxicologists begin crunching

data to determine what the spill is doing to people's bodies, doctors can already see what it might be doing to their psyches. Losing their livelihood, watching the destruction of the land they love, depending on a claim check from the company that caused all this in the first place—the spill is clearly taking a toll on the mental health of the Gulf coast residents. That's especially true in Louisiana, ground zero for the spill, where coastal residents are still picking up the pieces from Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Though the oil spill—except for the 11 rig workers killed when Deepwater Horizon exploded on April 20—didn't lead to the loss of life and property that Katrina, it could still be a [majorly traumatic event for residents](#):

"Most people who are severely affected will experience some emotional distress," said Dr. Carol North, director of the Program in Trauma and Disaster at the [Dallas](#) VA Medical Center. "This may involve anger or denial ... as well as a range of emotions such as disbelief, sadness, or grief over losses. Also, ability to sleep and appetite may be affected for a period of time among people who are very upset."

That's what Dr. Irwin Redlener found when he visited affected coastal communities in southeastern Louisiana on Monday. Redlener—the president of the [Children's Health Fund](#) and the director of the [National Center for Disaster Preparedness](#) at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health—knows more about how communities respond to catastrophes than anyone else. He's studied the aftermath of 9/11, worked with colleagues on the Haiti response after the quake this year and spent months in Gulf region after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. But he was surprised—and disturbed—by what he saw when he spoke with Gulf residents, including a number of children. There was significant frustration on the part of coastal residents. They didn't know whether they were at risk from the spill, and they didn't know whom to ask. "There was just overwhelming anxiety from people there," Redlener told me. "There was enormous concern about what would happen to them."

They were worried about physical harm, for themselves and their kids. Should they let children play on the beaches—as they would during any normal summer in coastal Louisiana—or keep them inside? Should pregnant women be worried about exposure to the spill? Even if the health effects from the spill and the cleanup turn out not to be serious—and it will be difficult to know that soon—the agony of the uncertainty is eating away at people. And children may be hurting the worst, Redlener says:

I would characterize this region, which has 6,000 to 8,000 children as a kind of ground zero of psychological catastrophe and crisis. People are scared. If you know what is happening and you can develop a coping mechanism you can adapt, but if you don't have a strategy and you need to make decisions and you can't get anyone to tell you what to do, it becomes frustrating and worrisome. These people are in a serious crisis, and it doesn't come across in the images we see on TV every day. Someone needs to get involved in this, but there's really no sense of an

effort going on. Anyone who says the people of this region do not need evaluation for mental health and emotional trauma and aren't facing real risk have no idea what is happening here.

Redlener notes that the oil means that children are now suffering "a second wave of very severe trauma," worrying about the risk of post traumatic stress syndrome for kids who lived through Katrina as well. But in a way, Redlener says, the spill is worse. As catastrophic as Katrina was, hurricanes are a part of life in Louisiana, even Category 5 ones. Katrina caused havoc, but after the storm passed, the cleanup and recovery could begin. The spill, though, is like a wound that won't heal, a chronic disease for an entire community—which means the trauma continues and the healing has yet to begin. And while the botched government response to Katrina engendered plenty of local anger after the storm, ultimately, how long can you stay mad at the weather? But the spill has no shortage of villains—BP, the federal government, the state government, the media—which means there is plenty of fuel for rage. "To say patience is running out is putting it mildly," Redlener says.

If people remain in a state of confusion—with no clear signal for what they need to do to keep themselves and their kids safe—expect the anger to worsen. Redlener himself is already pretty unhappy. "Someone has to lay down the law with this situation," he tells me. "We need to know who is running the show down here. It's still unclear and that should not be the case this far into the disaster." It's enough to make you livid—and depressed.