

## **CABIN FEVER – IT CAN BE DANGEROUS**

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Large parts of the nation are in the grip of snowstorms, ice storms, and bone-chilling weather. There are physical dangers obviously associated with the conditions -- from freezing to carbon monoxide poisoning from temporary heat sources -- but what about the psychological damage? From "cabin fever" to abject fear for life, inclement weather can hit home -- and sometimes overstays its welcome.

Depending upon the circumstances, the threat to a person's health and well being obviously depends on the severity of the situation. If you've got a family whom you love and you're happy to be snowed in together, you put a fire in the fireplace, and it's a wonderful time. But if you're lonely, or if you're depressed, or if you're phobic, then it's the kind of general stressor that can exacerbate a lot of different things that already exist.

People who have certain problems already can have a harder time when they're not mobile. Especially, people who are prone to be claustrophobic might find themselves to be very anxious when they're not able to get out [of the house]. And there is a certain loss of control that we get when we don't get to do our usual thing. Then there's the more real danger for a person who may be cut off from care they need or isolated by severe weather conditions. If you're not worried about getting any of your basic needs met, snow is fine ... unless you've got a physical ailment that may require urgent medical care at any given time. It's not unusual for seemingly benign situations to turn dangerous.

Someone who needs support and contact is vulnerable when homebound. People who are particularly fragile and can't fend for themselves are even at greater risk, and we find that children -- who certainly need more support -- and the elderly, are at greatest risk for stress and trauma after a disaster. Just the simple act of walking down the front walk is not so simple for many people during a snow or ice storm, and if electricity and phones are out, the risk of injury takes on an added threat. Older folks who may be physically frail, for whom falling down is not a trivial matter, could get more scared, and I would say people who are isolated and people who have nothing to do but ruminate about what could go wrong might have a harder time with it.

Anybody can be traumatized ... and any event can be sufficient to be traumatic, but some circumstances can lead to PTSD in some people, whereas in others the problem could end soon after the situation does. After stressful events -- be they weather-related or man-made -- it's not unusual to find people suffering from acute stress disorders in the following month. This stress reaction could include anxiety, sleeping problems, flashbacks, irritability, and difficulty eating and negative thoughts about the future. Mental health professionals find that it's very common to have these kinds of stressors continue on, and in the most extreme cases ... it may continue for months and years. The more severe the disaster, and the greater the loss, the more likelihood of the PTSD occurring for a longer period of time and being more intense.

Disasters end, snow and ice melt, but the memories and what they mean can last a lifetime. In difficult times, it's important to take care of pragmatic concerns, but don't neglect the psychological effects of the events. Once you get your water and your electricity back on, that's it, but there's the psychological piece that tends to linger.