

## **It's Okay to Not Be Okay: Navigating Complex Emotions After a Crisis**

In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, I found myself grappling with an unexpected set of emotions—I wrote about this briefly in my last blog.

Physically, I was unscathed—my home was intact, and apart from the inconvenience of losing power for eight days (and we thankfully had a generator!), my life resumed its usual rhythm. Yet, despite being one of the "fortunate" ones, I couldn't shake this overwhelming sense of unease, anxiety, and even guilt.

### **Why did I feel bad for feeling bad?**

This internal conflict made me question whether my emotions were valid.

Was it comparison, because others had suffered greater losses? Or was it survivor's guilt—feeling unworthy of safety when others weren't so lucky?

The truth is, it's a complex mix of both, and understanding these emotions can help us navigate them.

## **The Psychology of Survivor's Guilt**

Survivor's guilt is a well-documented psychological phenomenon, often seen in people who survive traumatic events like natural disasters, wars, or accidents.

Psychiatrist Dr. Charles Marmar explains that survivor's guilt stems from the internal belief that, because you were spared while others suffered, you somehow don't deserve to feel bad, let alone feel okay. This guilt manifests because of empathy—the deep sense that we feel for others who have suffered greater loss, making us question why we were spared when others weren't.

In cases like surviving a hurricane, it's natural to minimize your own experience. “I'm fine, so why do I feel so shaken?” becomes the internal dialogue.

Survivor's guilt triggers self-criticism and a tendency to downplay your own trauma. You may feel the need to “qualify” your hardship against those who suffered greater losses, convincing yourself that your emotions are less valid.

## The Trap of Comparison

Another layer to these emotions comes from the instinct to compare your situation to others. We tend to think that if someone else's suffering was more visible or dramatic, then our own emotional response is somehow less legitimate.

***This is called comparative suffering, and it's a trap.***

Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, warns about the dangers of comparative suffering.

She says, ***“When you deny your own story, you also deny the capacity to grow from it.”*** In other words, downplaying your pain doesn't make someone else's pain any less, but it does **invalidate your own healing process.**

No matter how much worse someone else's situation may seem, it doesn't make your own experience—your fear, anxiety, or trauma—any less real or worthy of attention.

## **It's All Trauma—Even If You're Okay**

Here's something important to understand: trauma is subjective.

Just because your physical environment wasn't shattered doesn't mean you didn't experience emotional turmoil. When you go through a high-stress situation like a hurricane, even if the storm didn't cause severe damage to your home, it still impacts your nervous system.

Psychologists point out that our bodies are hardwired to react to danger.

Whether you experience the worst of a storm or only the threat of it, your body goes into fight-or-flight mode, releasing stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. When that danger passes, the physical effects of stress can linger, resulting in anxiety, sleeplessness, or feeling emotionally off-balance—even if nothing “severe” happened to you.

In fact, neuroscientist Dr. Bruce Perry explains that stress responses aren't necessarily proportional to the event itself.

***In other words, your body's reaction is personal, shaped by your own sensitivities and past experiences.***

## **The Science Behind Emotional Validity**

In moments like these, it's crucial to acknowledge that all emotions are valid, regardless of the circumstances.

According to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) principles, denying or suppressing your feelings only amplifies stress and emotional dissonance. Recognizing and naming your emotions—even the uncomfortable ones—helps to diminish their intensity.

Studies show that when you ***accept and label your emotions***, your brain becomes better at processing them, making it easier to move forward.

This is especially true after a traumatic event, where dismissing your feelings as “not valid enough” can hinder emotional recovery.

## **How to Navigate These Complex Emotions**

1. Acknowledge Your Feelings: Give yourself permission to feel whatever it is you're feeling, even if it seems minor

in comparison to others' experiences. Emotions don't operate on a hierarchy—your pain is real, even if it's different from someone else's.

2. Don't Minimize: Remember that trauma is trauma. Whether it's emotional, physical, or a combination of both, your experience is valid. If you feel rattled, anxious, or upset, those feelings matter and deserve attention.

3. Practice Self-Compassion: Research by Dr. Kristin Neff shows that self-compassion—treating yourself with the same kindness you'd offer a friend—is critical for emotional resilience. Instead of criticizing yourself for feeling bad, recognize that it's okay to not be okay.

4. Connect with Others: Talking through your emotions with people who understand can help normalize what you're feeling. Whether it's through your community, friends, or a therapist, expressing your experience helps you process it.

5. Give Yourself Time: Recovering from a crisis isn't always linear. Some days you may feel fine, and other days, it may hit you all over again. Be patient with yourself and trust that healing takes time.

Feeling bad for feeling bad is a natural but unnecessary burden.

When you've lived through a traumatic event, whether you were physically unscathed or not, it's important to recognize that your emotional experience is just as valid as anyone else's. Survivor's guilt and comparison might complicate your emotions, but the science is clear: processing your feelings without judgment is the healthiest path forward.

It's okay to not be okay. Healing begins with accepting where you are, not where you think you should be.