

Japan must cope with psychological impact

March 15, 2011 by CANDICE FERRETTE / candice.ferrette@newsday.com



The human toll of Japan's nuclear disaster is hard to predict, but those who've studied previous crises say the psychological impact tends to be among the most lasting and widespread health problems.

"Radiation just has a terror aspect to it because it is associated with atomic warfare and doomsday type of phenomena," said Ray Goldstein, director of public health at [Stony Brook University](#). "People associate it with the end-of-civilization thinking."

The evidence of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal thinking in the aftermath of two nuclear-plant accidents -- Three Mile Island in 1979 and [Chernobyl](#) in 1986 -- has been clearer, in some cases, than the physical health impact, which is still being debated, he said.

Goldstein was among the researchers who collected both health and mental-health data for President Jimmy Carter's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island.

People who lived within 10 miles of nuclear events had double the rate of mental illness of the regular population, even decades afterward, said Evelyn Bromet, psychiatry professor at Stony Brook University who studied Three Mile Island, near Harrisburg, Pa., and Chernobyl, in what is now [Ukraine](#). "These events are always complicated. They unfold and leave the community feeling isolated and frightened," she said.

Pregnant women and those raising toddlers at the time of the Three Mile Island partial meltdown had the deepest emotional scars, Bromet said.

Surveys 10 and 25 years after both nuclear accidents found survivors were still worried about future health problems.

Norman Kleiman, director of the Eye Radiation and Environmental Research Laboratory at [Columbia University](#), said there's a misperception that Chernobyl killed thousands.

That population was under enormous stress and panic, and the rates of [alcoholism](#) and poor access to medical care had a much greater impact on public health, Kleiman said.

But Japan's disaster is different from either of the others, said Bruce Dohrenwend, professor of social science and epidemiology at Columbia University. More radiation has been leaked

and the nuclear meltdown is happening along with a massive earthquake and tsunami.

The mental-health impact was the greatest health problem in Three Mile Island, Dohrenwend said. "Whether that will be the same in Japan, we don't know." With Ridgely Ochs

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