

News

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* * * * *Ability to cope depleted by
heat says psychiatrist.

DALLAS--With the elderly in un-air-conditioned homes suffering the most from the current heat wave, the City of Dallas has opened air conditioned recreation centers and offered transportation for anyone who needs help. Surprisingly, there has been almost no response from elderly people.

In addition, relatives and friends of the elderly have reported an unwillingness to move temporarily or to accept other help.

Hot weather is an assault on the ego, the capacity of the self to comprehend the environment and deal with drives. Heat "depletes the ego's ability to cope," says Dr. Fred Guggenheim, associate professor of psychiatry at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas.

With coping mechanisms already depleted by the heat, elderly people are further threatened by the change of moving, even temporarily. "Those who are psychologically elderly are less flexible. They would be moving to an 'uncharted land' and losing control over their lives. 'The devil you know is better than the devil you don't know.'" says Guggenheim. He hastens to add that many physiologically elderly people are as adaptable as teenagers.

It is difficult to help those who won't leave their homes. They can be reassured that they can go back home. Many are worried, however, that their homes may be robbed or vandalized while they are away. For many older people in older neighborhoods, this is a real problem.

If they don't have the money to pay air conditioning bills, financial help may solve that problem. Older people place a high value on independence, however, since dependence to them means "nursing home." They may be unable to accept help of any kind.

If the hot environment causes heat exhaustion, the physiological mechanisms for coping with temperature break down. The victim may become confused, lethargic or emotionally volatile.

Besides physical suffering, the hot weather has caused more incidents of violence and interpersonal problems.

The heat produces lots of irritability, says the psychiatrist. "We all have hostile feelings. Most of the time we keep them in check, but the heat may cause a person to be unable to keep hostility in check."

Other physiological and sociological events that similarly assault the ego include sleeplessness, crowding, loud noise, food deprivation, extreme fright and extremes in other kinds of weather.

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