



***McCaskill Family Services, PLLC***  
***Pediatric Psychologist & Psycho-Educational Evaluation Specialists***  
Main Business Office: 409 Plymouth Rd., Suite 250, Plymouth, MI 48170  
Brighton Location: 2040 Grand River Annex, Suite 300, Brighton, MI 48114  
Phone: (734) 416-9098, Ext. 1 FAX: (734) 416-0158  
[www.mccaskillfamilyservices.com](http://www.mccaskillfamilyservices.com) [office@mccaskillfamilyservices.com](mailto:office@mccaskillfamilyservices.com)

## **Weathering the Storm: How to Manage Storm Anxiety**

By: Sierra Sands, LLP

As we approach the busiest time of year for severe weather activity, storm anxiety is top of mind for many families. Storm anxiety is the intense overwhelming fear of severe weather events such as thunderstorms, tornadoes, or hurricanes, which often lasts beyond the storm, and can cause daily distress. Read on for more information on coping strategies for this common experience.

### **Understanding Storm Anxiety**

There are six types of weather phobias:

- Astraphobia- fear of thunder and lightning
- Ancaophobia- fear of wind
- Chionophobia- fear of snow
- Lilapsophobia- fear of severe weather
- Nephophobia- fear of clouds
- Ombrophobia- fear of rain

Symptoms of weather-related anxiety can include:

- Obsessive thoughts about the potential for storms
- Constant checking or monitoring of apps, radios, or television for weather updates
- Canceling or avoiding activities because of a forecast
- Experiencing fear, irritability or panic days before a predicted storm
- Physical symptoms of anxiety such as heart palpitations or difficulty breathing during storms
- Experiencing flashbacks or intense fear if a previous storm caused damage



Potential causes of weather fears may be traumatic events related to weather as a child, mirroring a parent or sibling who experiences storm anxiety, sensitivity to noise, or unpredictability of severe weather.

### **Preparation as Empowerment**

Creating a storm safety plan can create security when a storm does come. On a sunny day when there are no storms on the forecast, plan where to shelter if a tornado is coming your way (whether that is in your basement or a small room on a low floor away from outside walls, doors, and windows). Practice getting to that safe space. Create an emergency kit that is ready to go if needed. Allow kids to get involved in age-appropriate ways. For younger kids, this can look like using simple language, practicing safety steps, and modeling calm behavior. For adolescents, involve them in planning and problem-solving, and encourage personalized coping skills. Across the board, when kids are involved in weather safety planning, it is important to:

- Keep information honest but not overwhelming
- Emphasize what will keep them safe
- Maintain a predictable plan
- Avoid overexposure to alarming weather media

### **Calming Techniques**

If a storm does come, safety is the priority, but coping with the stress and anxiety that a storm may bring matters, too. *These techniques are for emotional regulation and should not be used as a substitute for taking safety precautions during severe weather.*

- Grounding exercises- deep breathing or body scanning activities can help you focus on the present moment and manage physical anxiety.
- Distractions- listening to calming music, reading a favorite book, watching a movie, or playing a game can help distract from the moment if things feel too stressful. Another way to distract is by engaging in mental games, like counting backwards from 100 by 7's or listing items in a specific category (i.e., colors, animals).
- Soothing- create a calming space that will soothe your senses with your favorite items.
- Affirmations- remind yourself that "I am safe" and "This storm will pass".



### Supporting Loved Ones

Severe weather can feel stressful no matter how old you are. When talking to children about storms, provide basic information such as “Storms can be loud, but we stay safe inside” to avoid increasing fear. In conversations with older children and teens, sharing fact-based information about what may cause storms while simultaneously involving them in planning for safety helps them understand severe weather while also giving them a sense of control. Using visual aids like simple weather maps or storybooks can educate children without alarming them. Most importantly, parents should model calm behavior and either encourage using coping skills together or support individual coping skills should a storm arrive. For someone who is anxious about storms, it is helpful to discuss what is a realistic risk versus anxiety. There is a difference between possibility and probability.



### If Anxiety Becomes Overwhelming

Sometimes, anxiety around storms moves beyond momentary stress about a storm and into something that may need extra support. A history of trauma due to past experiences with severe weather or natural disasters can increase someone’s risk of experiencing storm anxiety. Additionally, general anxiety, OCD, or sensory sensitivities can make storms extra distressing.

Here are some signs that it might be time to seek professional help for storm anxiety:

1. Persistent anxiety-
  - a. Feeling anxious about storms days in advance, frequently checking weather apps/radar during the day, and having a hard time focusing due to “what if” thoughts about the weather.
  - b. These feelings can be intense or prolonged, with one experiencing feelings of dread or helplessness and anxiety lingering after the storm has passed.
2. Avoidance/safety behavior interferes with life-
  - a. Refusing to leave the house if storms are possible, avoiding activities or traveling due to forecasts, and rearranging your life around the possibility of storms.
  - b. Overpreparing (repeatedly packing/unpacking emergency items) and only feeling okay if certain safety routines are followed.
3. Intense physical symptoms
  - a. Feelings of panic, including rapid heart rate, shaking, and shortness of breath.
  - b. Feeling nauseous, dizzy, or faint.
  - c. Experiencing panic attacks during or when thinking about storms.
4. Sleep disturbance
  - a. Having difficulty falling asleep due to fear of storms.
  - b. Waking up to check the weather,
  - c. Staying awake “just in case”.
5. Reassurance seeking
  - a. Frequently asking if things will be okay or seeking constant updates from weather radars/apps.
  - b. Any relief that is felt from this does not last for long.
6. Impact on family functioning
  - a. Parents needing to alter routines for anxious children.
  - b. Other siblings impacted by one child’s anxiety.
  - c. Increased family stress during storm season.

If the fear seems out of proportion to the actual risk, it is hard to manage even with coping strategies, and it is interfering with daily life, then it would make sense to seek extra support. You do not have to manage this alone. Therapies like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) can be effective in helping children and adults feel more in control of their anxieties. With the right tools, storms do not have to feel so scary.