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Article 96

Come Hell and High Water: Reflections on Post Disaster Intervention for Hurricane Ike

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While the American infrastructure toward major natural disaster response has been significantly altered in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, there is still a need for improvements in understanding the behaviors, perceptions, and needs of those impacted by the storm so that the mental health community can better respond to the next disaster. This article will focus on the needs and perceptions of the storm survivors as described by a cadre of school and mental health counselors who experienced the aftermath of the recovery effort in their own “backyard”. It will also discuss possible disaster recovery options as proposed by prior experience of those directly impacted by natural disaster.

A View Through Developmental Theorists

Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages

Basic human developmental theories must now be viewed through the lens of a storm-survivor. The concept of trust (Erickson, 1963) is developed by the infant as they learn that their caregivers will respond to their basic needs. For many on the Gulf Coast, many unfavorable lessons were learned as a result of observing the catastrophic Hurricane Katrina and the fiasco resulting from the evacuation of 2.1 million people from the Houston-Galveston region during Hurricane Rita: local, state, and national authorities cannot be trusted to protect the safety of an evacuating populous. Because of this lack of trust, community residents in the impact cone made their own decisions whether to stay or evacuate and consequently lived (or died) as a result of this decision. Twenty-one people in the Galveston area died as a direct result of Hurricane Ike, either due to

drowning/injury or to pre-existing health issues that could not be supported during the storm and its aftermath (Paschenko, 2010).

Maslow's Perspective

Basic human needs for food, water, shelter, and safety were disrupted for most of the impacted population for weeks. For some, the need for shelter and a clean, safe place to live continued to be a serious issue for months; for others, the issue of safe shelter is still unresolved. A city of tents was created on Galveston Island on the grounds of one of the closed elementary schools; residents included not only children, parents, elderly, but also criminals, pedophiles, and transients. Unsubstantiated stories (gossip) of night time terror in Tent City emerged through accounts of child rape, robberies, and other predatory behaviors, similar to the stories repeated by those who experienced the horrors of the New Orleans SuperDome. Although Tent City was closed within a few weeks, many families continued to live in tents on either private or public property throughout Fall 2008 because no other housing was available. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) once again provided trailers but these were shunned by many due to fear of formaldehyde poisoning or because local officials created policies prohibiting putting trailers in areas unzoned for this type of home. In Galveston, the four major Section 8 housing projects were condemned and quickly demolished, leaving an entire population of indigent or low income families without any possibility of returning "home." An intensely emotional and controversial political debate ensued; much of this debate focused on stereotypical perceptions regarding those who had previously lived in these communities and was disparaging to both low income and minority populations. As of October 2010, no decision has yet been made whether or not to rebuild.

The Moral View

Both Kohlberg's view of moral development and Gilligan's view came to bear fruit in the days following the devastation of Ike. The pre-conventional stage of both theorists could be seen in the attempts to simply survive. Kohlberg (1981) identified this stage as an attempt to avoid punishment or gain reward, while Gilligan (1982) described it as survival mode. The residents of Galveston and surrounding areas were doing what they could to simply survive and basing decisions on this factor. However, observers also saw the sacrifices of others and the attempts by those to lend a hand to others' needs, which reflects aspects of both conventional and post-conventional stages on the part of both theorists. Major efforts were made by local residents to help each other and to do what was best for society, placing their decisions in the post-conventional stage of moral development.

Kubler-Ross's Grief and Loss

Kubler-Ross's (1969) stages of grief were evident during the immediate recovery efforts and, for many, have continued throughout post-storm years. The Great 1900 Storm of Galveston resulted in the creation of a 14 foot high, 20 mile seawall that has served to protect the island for the past century. Citizens were shocked that the seawall did not adequately hold back the waves and that the majority of the destruction was caused by relentless pounding of the 20 foot storm surge. For many, the level of destruction was inconceivable and their beliefs that the city was invulnerable were

shattered. Although the city managers and civil authorities readily used any resources available to help rebuild the community, a general unfocused anger towards governmental entities, insurance companies, and those perceived as being influential in the redevelopment of the area continues to be an open wound for many in the community. Pleading, begging, threatening, trading, and suing, were interspersed with marginal compliance as well as both covert and overt defiance for local ordinances. Depression in various forms pervasively reared its ugly head as survivors and helpers struggled through the overwhelming task of grieving losses and cleaning up the mess, but ultimately, the community banded together to salvage what could be saved and to rebuild the rest.

Stages of Crisis

Heroic Phase

Response to this disaster followed traditional crisis textbook format (Farberow & Frederick, 1978): rescuers and help converged upon the impact zone from all sectors of the country. Initially, optimistic stories were abundant, citing heroic sagas of rescue as well as tales of bravery, strength, and nearly superhuman effort. The media seemed to compete to see which crew could photograph or record the impact of the storm's devastation from the most disastrous angle while stoically placing themselves in potentially dangerous situations. State and national politicians helicoptered into the area, glad-handed the survivors while the clicking cameras documented promises of support. Local firefighters, police officers, beach patrol guards, and emergency response teams worked tirelessly throughout the ordeal with little sleep, food, or relief to try to save as many people, animals, and businesses as possible.

Honeymoon Phase

The post storm honeymoon phase cited examples of neighbors banding together to feed and help each other cope with both the mundane and the horrific. During this time, parking lots were crammed with emergency response and repair vehicles from across the country, the Red Cross, Salvation Army, National Guard, and innumerable charitable and businesses set up camp and doled out food, ice, medical assistance, yard clean up, and any other type of needed support. A limited number of portable showers, laundry facilities, and air conditioned rest-havens were located on the island. Insurance adjusters and FEMA workers sported tents with fans and cold water for those who needed to file loss claims, and major debris removal equipment was transported to help with the clean up effort. However, this phase was short lived.

Disillusionment Phase

Exactly when the disillusionment phase of recovery from Hurricane Ike actually began is debatable, but this phase was clearly evident as the response teams left town and moved on to the next disaster. Many families were still (and still are) homeless, living in temporary living conditions with multiple families crowded into small apartments or trailers while others found shelter in tents, cars, or campers. Several schools were severely damaged and hundreds of children were relocated to other buildings or districts. Local rescue and response workers had to deal with the loss of their own homes and family problems while attempting to support those with even less. Hospital and medical

facilities on the island were closed for months and emergencies had to be transported 50 miles away to Houston area hospitals. Many churches, often a strong support for congregations in pain, were severely damaged; church leaders were faced with the challenge of trying to take care of the needs of their own personal families as well as their surviving church family while assuming the overwhelming task of trying to help clean up piles of debris and attempting to support, feed, and relocate storm survivors. Mental health personnel were challenged to provide support for those already under extreme circumstances: patients with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, Alzheimer "s disease, and other severely debilitating mental health problems had little to no support as most traditional support centers were either closed or overloaded.

In many instances, minimally damaged schools and churches seemed to be the focal location for the dissemination of most of the available resources. The organizational structure of the school system was already in place to care for large numbers of people and information or other resources could be disseminated to parents. As soon as possible, most families sent their children back to school while the parents went about the business of trying to recover their losses. The local university counselor training program set up an online response board that served as a centrally located information receiving/dissemination point for many of the local school counselors. This information exchange helped counselors to share available resources while posting problems or requesting support. The mental health community as a whole responded quickly and effectively during the honeymoon phase and sporadically during the disillusionment phase. Counselors who choose to volunteer to help in natural disaster type situations such as a hurricane need to clearly understand the evolving levels of services needed and ways to effectively help those who have been impacted by a major hurricane.

An Unexpected Reality

Where's My Office?

While the International Red Cross holds disaster training for mental health workers and organizes a monumental response effort to support communities during times of disaster, many counselors come to the area via churches, friends, or other charitable venues and are unaware of the true needs of the storm survivors and the limitations of available resources. Those who come to help usually do so from truly altruistic purposes: it is human nature to want to help those who are hurting (de Waal, 1996). However, unless an individual has been "prepped" in what to expect, the peripherals associated with a disaster like Ike or Katrina can be quite disconcerting. During the first few weeks, one should not be surprised to experience some of the following:

- Intrusive wildlife in unexpected places (snakes, alligators, spiders, fire ants, opossums, raccoons, coyotes, skunks, and feral animals)
- Bloated, rotting carcasses (pets, cattle, wildlife, sea-life)
- Residents often lose their "manners" and become threatening or aggressive if they perceive strangers are encroaching on their claimed space or property
- Increased road rage, domestic and child abuse, racism and discrimination

- Frustrated, threatening crowds, scavenging, theft
- Vigilantes and looters
- Distrust toward “outsiders”; fear of “carpetbagger” type behaviors
- Many older teenagers and elderly have been abandoned by their families
- The Bizarre: “There’s a tiger loose here on the island. They shot a lion yesterday and the cops here told me not to worry because they have a shoot-to-kill order for the tiger.” (Genovese, 2009, p. 52)

The helper should not expect:

- Office space
- A hotel room, a bed, or any private space
- Hot food or cold drinks
- Displays of gratitude
- Air conditioning
- ATMs, cell phone service, or electricity
- Running water
- Clients to seek help

Although innumerable lessons have been learned from previous disaster response, there is no single model that yields an appropriate and effective standard response for a community disaster. Each community is served by its own local government; this local government is responsible for requesting help, delegating tasks, and providing assistance. Consequently, each response is unique and contingent upon the pre- and post- planning skills of the local leaders. Many response helpers are disappointed that there is a marked lack of organization to the response. After Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Ike, many helpers came to the Houston Galveston area to help “counsel” those impacted by the storm. Several helpers were visibly upset or offended that they were asked to serve food or babysit in shelters instead of counseling storm survivors. During this time, counseling needs to take place in the community (Kennedy, 2008) and counselors should consider that their actions rather than their words will help develop the trust necessary for the relationship (Echterling, Presbury, and McKee, 2005). As people work together, bonds are built and stories can be shared. For instance, a counselor might be asked to help cook and serve food, clean up debris in yards or homes, bury deceased pets, or play with children while parents seek resources. As the relationship grows during the joint working experience, the counselor might hear the survivor (not client) vocalize some of the following issues:

- Survivor’s guilt
- Fear that their world as they know it has ended
- The need to be a superhero
- Minimization or denial of pain, loss, or exhaustion
- Shame for not being adequately prepared
- Reluctance to grieve own losses because others have lost more
- Anger that the “system” has abandoned them.

Many survivors experience the worst of their pain during this time because someone they love is in such pain or the pain of being separated from someone they love. “What hurt me the most was to see [survivor] and her pain. Really hurts me to see my grandchildren hurt like that” (Aulds, 2009b, p. 7). Gallows-type humor also emerges and reflects burnout and defiance toward the aggressor, as well as an effort to perk the spirits and keep life in perspective:

“...the dead cows out by the helipad... The county wants \$300,000 to move the cows. One of our docs said, „Give me a jet ski and I can do it for half that price.”” (Genovese, 2009, p.54)

“...I can’t believe I did CPR to save my mother’s ferret... he’s been looking at me romantically ever since.” (personal communication, September, 2008)

“...and there’s now a 32 ton sailboat in my front yard. I might use it as a spare bedroom but it needs redecorating first.” (personal communication, September, 2008)

Helpers that truly come to “work” as counselors in a post-hurricane area should consider bringing the following much needed support materials:

- Toiletries
- Bug spray and sunscreen
- Underwear for children; diapers for babies
- Writing materials
- Work clothes, gloves, and rubber boots
- Allergy medications and first aid supplies
- Batteries and solar charging devices
- Drawing materials for children

“Real Help” in the First Weeks After the Storm

Collecting necessities and making donations to disaster areas is highly needed and commended, as long as the items collected and donated are truly needed. After Hurricane Ike, so many people donated used clothing, bedding, and furniture to area depositories that the depositories were forced to turn away donations. School counselors who served the impacted communities after Hurricane Ike noted that the following items were most appreciated:

- Gift cards in small increments or cash
- Camping equipment
- Non-perishable food
- School supplies
- New clothing, including socks and underwear in small sizes
- Batteries
- Children’s books; adult fiction paperbacks

Many people do not realize that not only homes and families were significantly damaged; schools and other community buildings also need to be rebuilt. For many schools, the deductible for their district insurance is so high that much of their loss must

simply be absorbed and insurance payments are allocated to repair/replace structural damage. However, many of the materials and supplies in classrooms (and counseling offices) have been personally purchased and acquired over the years in the profession. These items are neither covered by district insurance nor easily replaced by those counselors, teachers, and librarians who are also trying to cope with personal losses as well as support children who have suffered major loss. For instance, when the roof of one large elementary school collapsed, the building was condemned and declared unsafe for any salvage effort. The school counselor's office needed to be restocked with basic counseling tools: bibliotherapy materials, games, playroom items, puppets, and counseling curricular materials. Fortunately, private donations from various university counseling faculties and graduate honor societies helped provide much needed resources to school counselors impacted by Hurricane Ike.

Down the Road: The Months After the Storm

A few months after a storm, the energies and hopes of the survivors tended to diminish. Community helpers and support systems slowly return to their daily lives, the Red Cross and Salvation Army moved to the next disaster, donations of manpower and support dwindled, and the residents are left to contend with their losses. Frustration builds, people feel abandoned or slighted, and the disillusionment phase of a crisis bloomed. Because many major businesses had been severely damaged and closed, jobs were lost and resources were sparse. Local, state, and federal officials became deeply involved in political debates over responsibilities. Private insurance companies insure homes for wind damage but not rising water damage and therefore withheld or refused settlements. Many mortgage companies held insurance payments in escrow and only released funds after the work was completed. Obtaining repair and rebuilding permits became a nightmare due to the lengthy and complex policies established by city managers. Unethical transient construction and repair crews demanded payment upfront and then failed to perform the work to county standards.

Many homes sported "blue roofs," large tarps that cover holes left by wind damage while other homes were missing major structural features such as walls or ceilings. Federal building engineers must inspect homes to assess level of damage; if a home had major structural damage, it was often coded as a "red" condemned home and no building repair permit was authorized. Many of the residents of Galveston had no insurance at all and negotiations with FEMA for needed support continue to be time consuming, frustrating and often fruitless.

Coupled with the frustrations of rebuilding, residents faced another environmental change: the weather turned cold. Families were still living in tents, campers, or in buildings with no heat or water. Many of these same families lost the majority of their belongings in the storm and replaced them with summer-oriented materials. By mid-October, the temperatures dropped into the mid 40s and families needed warm clothing, warm food, and warm shelter. Even the death rate increased as grief, stress, and poor living conditions took the lives of the frail and fragile (Serapina, 2009).

For the first year after Hurricane Ike, local public servants faced long hours with little obvious progress.

All of us on the island and in the surrounding communities affected by Hurricane Ike have continued ongoing stress, hard work, irregular hours, chaotic and

disturbed jobs, sleep problems, uncertainty about insurance, etc.... we need so stay aware of the ongoing high level of chronic, post-post Ike in our community. (Serapina, 2009, p. B6)

At this point, the following additional support was needed:

- Warm clothes and bedding, especially for children and seniors
- Space heaters
- Relief counselors who could conduct school based support groups for children and families
- Debriefing sessions to support burned out mental health counselors
- Manned crisis counselor hotline to support exhausted counselors in crisis

Reality Based Fears: Long Term Issues

Short term, immediate effects of the disaster were very evident and nationally broadcast. The long time psychological impact of this disaster is still unfolding and yields continuing, constant stress for many. Weaver (1995) refers to the horrors of coping with an endless stream of bureaucratic red tape as “the second disaster” (p. 73). At the end of the first year, more than 2,000 children were still missing from Galveston Independent School District’s rolls; 163 employee positions were cut (Meyers, 2009). More than five million cubic feet of debris at a cost of \$570 million was removed from the community, yet the task of cleaning away the destruction of the storm was still unfinished (Aulds, 2009a). Galveston continued to experience loss: businesses tried to re-start yet failed, hundreds of historic oak trees needed to be removed due to sea water poisoning, the tax base dropped significantly due to property loss, and revenue from tourism declined dramatically. Two years Post-Ike, the impact of the storm is less noticeable: most homes are either repaired or demolished, lawyers are perpetually working toward addressing unresolved claims, most families have reunited yet are still in the process of rebuilding their lives. Undiagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is rampant. Child abuse statistics have increased significantly since pre-September 2008. School counselors report high levels of anxiety in both staff and students when the late spring and early fall storm clouds roll in from the Gulf. Most families have tentative family evacuation plans in place; many families carry water and emergency documents in their cars. The businesses are slowly reopening, yet many are permanently closed. Galveston ISD has closed many schools due to the lower population while upper Galveston County schools use temporary buildings due to overcrowding. The need for post-Ike counseling now includes the following:

- Conflict resolution
- Major financial worries
- Loss of trust in community and governmental leaders
- Racism and discrimination related issues
- Loss of tolerance, patience, empathy, or hope
- Persistent fear of weather

Based on personal experience of those directly impacted by the natural disaster of Ike, and the resulting consequences, a model for disaster intervention is being proposed.

Academic Based Center for Disaster Intervention

After Hurricane Katrina forced the mass exodus of more than 250,000 people to the Houston-Galveston area, area schools were inundated with an enrollment of hundreds of relocated children who were traumatized by the aftermath of the storm (loss, fear) and the forced relocation into unknown neighborhoods and schools. The domino effect of this enrollment yielded overloaded classrooms and created a huge burden on already overstressed school counselors. Although some of the children have now returned to New Orleans, many still remain due to lack of housing, employment, and personal family decisions to live in an area that is above sea level. During the past 5 years, Houston-Galveston area counselors have had hands-on experience in coping with a mass-movement, but because they are so busy working with the population rather than writing about working with the population, their experiences are mostly undocumented in professional literature.

University counseling faculty has close contacts with the majority of the school counselors in the South Houston-Galveston County/Brazoria County area. During this time period, the area university counseling program faculty maintained an open information-sharing web board based on www.schoolnotes.com. Before, during, and after the Katrina-Rita and Ike disasters, area counselors communicated with professors through personal email systems and professors posted pertinent information on an electronic bulletin board. This information enabled area counselors to have information regarding services, assistance, online or web based resources, and even provided a sounding board for frustrated or overstressed professional helpers. When Hurricane Gustav threatened the Gulf Coast, former and current counseling students and area practitioners were reminded that they could count on the *schoolnotes* website for current resources and area counseling-based information. Gustav served as a drill for Hurricane Ike just a few weeks later. Although the university server was shut down for several days, the *schoolnotes* website continued to be monitored and maintained through the use of Blackberry and off site access to communication. Counseling faculty also contacted service and professional counseling resources (other university faculties, honor societies, professional counseling organizations, faith based organizations, unimpacted school districts) and made connected necessary connections. After the university reopened, the counseling faculty continued to receive and share information to help rebuild the community. During Fall 2008, this same university helped the community by relaying information that resulted in

- Re-stocking/rebuilding three elementary counselor's play therapy rooms
- Helping area children get needed school supplies and school clothes
- Debriefing and supporting many over-stressed school counselors
- Providing emergency support for families in crisis
- Dissemination of free web-based counseling materials related to relocation, loss, and storm recovery
- Helped displaced workers find work
- Connected service based community helpers with those who needed assistance

Lessons Learned

There is a need to formalize the aforementioned activities through the creation of an Academic-Based Center for Disaster Intervention. This center could connect

university counselor training programs, mental health providers, school counselors and social workers, and serve as an information sharing base in the event of another Gulf Coast natural disaster. To our knowledge, no such center exists in the U.S.

There is a need to document and promote best practices that can assist a university counselor training program in both preparing for a disaster as well as appropriately responding in an organized manner. Documentation needs to include response and resources for all five levels of disaster (preparation, heroic phase, honeymoon phase, disillusionment phase, and recovery phase). Furthermore, there is a need to provide ongoing, emotional, and mental support for helpers (counselors, mental health workers, clergy) and the community especially after crisis responders have moved on to the next disaster (i.e., Red Cross, FEMA, etc.). Additionally, there is a need for the creation of a disaster-based counseling clinic to train counselors to serve clients experiencing storm related PTSD and to debrief practicing counselors who have been intensely involved in recovery efforts during the first few years post disaster.

Final Thoughts

Just over 2 years have passed since the Ike disaster. The cold winds from the north have cooled the waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the possibility of storm threat is finally over for 2010; storm related preparations, fears, and anxiety will rekindle each June and remain through October for many years to come. Fortunately, resilience has prevailed and strong determination has revitalized the community. However, it is still difficult to effectively express thanks for surviving, for assistance, or even acknowledge the changes in lifestyle, perceptions, and energy wrought by Hurricane Ike.

Even the authors of this article remain impacted by the lasting effects of the storm. Revisiting disaster notes brought forth a level of anxiety and rekindled some feelings of exhaustion. However, the article needed to be written and needs to be shared; hopefully revisiting, structuring, and writing our experiences will help us—or someone else—better cope with the before-, during- and after- impact of the next major natural disaster.

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