

Building Community During a Major Disaster

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Normal life has a strong hold on us; it is what we are familiar with and understand. But this "normality" can change suddenly, radically, and painfully, bringing death, destruction, and dislocation with little or no warning. Prolonged and extensive disasters are a difficult challenge to the safety, security, health and wellness of our families and communities. We may expect help to arrive almost immediately; this may not happen; circumstances can *prevent* it from happening.

Disasters happen. On April 5, 1992, the first of what became an average of 4,000 artillery shells a day fell on Sarajevo, a cosmopolitan European city of 500,000 people that had hosted the 1984 Winter Olympics. The siege continued for almost 4 years (the longest of the 20th century). Overnight, the city lost electricity, water, natural gas, & telephone service. 10,000 people were killed, 50,000 wounded. By 1993, the price of wood was \$200 per cubic meter, dandelions and nettles fetched high prices. Seeds were smuggled into the city, & gardens were planted everywhere. Ham radio operators helped the city keep in touch with the outside world. For light, people used car batteries, candles, and homemade oil lamps (jars filled with vegetable oil, with shoe strings for wicks).

Throughout this traumatic event, the people of Sarajevo coped with dramatically changed circumstances by working together and continuing their lives as best they could under the circumstances. Many cottage industries and small businesses were started to provide the goods & services that people needed under the new situation. Artists & musical groups staged plays & concerts; religious services continued, children went to school, doctors operated by flashlight. Everything was inconvenient -- people had to walk miles for water (they also caught rain from roofs and drank melted snow), there was little public transportation. The city's markets stayed open, but prices fluctuated with the availability of home grown/made or smuggled goods. The simplest tasks became time consuming. Snipers and artillery added to the stress. The suicide and general mortality rates increased. Few buildings escaped damage. But the city did not collapse and die in a chaos of disorder and violence. People were brought together in solidarity by the situation. The moral of this story: Some responses to disasters are better than others; when life hands you a lemon, don't whine, make lemonade.

3 kinds of reactions to disaster: (1) During and after a disaster, people may develop personality changes relating to trauma-related stress. They may experience anxiety attacks, have trouble sleeping and eating, feel on edge & brittle, be easily disturbed or upset, become over-protective of loved ones, experience emotional episodes (including crying), and suffer despair and a sense of hopelessness. They may feel so powerless to affect their situation that they are almost incapable of helping themselves. They may become angry and resentful, unable to make decisions, easily irritated, unable to focus on work, lacking the energy even for basic daily activities. They may be sad, depressed, and unwilling to confront the situation that brought about the disaster. (Sources: Virginia Cooperative Extension & materials distributed after the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City and the May 1999 tornado disaster in the same city.)

(2) During and after a disaster, people may experience strong feelings of solidarity & bonding with their neighbors and others who have suffered the same situation. They may become very cooperative, generous, compassionate, helpful, and warm-hearted. People often demonstrate the ability to learn

new skills very fast, and exhibit a lot of ingenuity and creativity in working around obstacles and managing chaotic situations. Humans are known for sacrificing themselves to save others -- sometimes for members of their family, but also for complete strangers. We can work hard and smart when the need is there. Instead of giving into despair, we can become pro-active. People are very adaptable, even when changes are coming very fast and the stress is very grave.

(3) During and after a disaster, some people take advantage of the suffering, distress, weakness, or problems of others. They profiteer on scarce goods, refuse to cooperate on necessary neighborhood projects, hinder rescue and repair efforts, and/or turn violent and criminal. Some disasters have been followed by violence & looting, and theft generally increases. Goods donated by humanitarian organizations may end up in the marketplaces at inflated prices. People can be rude, arrogant, pushy, violent, or lazy in the absence of a disaster, and these traits may be intensified by the stress of a major traumatic event.

Got commonsense? Panic, paralysis, flight, and helplessness. Pro-activity, solidarity, cooperation, smart work. Crime, thuggery, profiteering, vicious competition. All responses to disasters are not created equal; some are more dangerous than others. If times get tough, encourage and support the good; discourage and avoid the bad, protect the weak & defenseless. The actions of individuals and neighborhoods can have dramatic consequences for the larger systems of society (for good or evil). The Scout precept -- "Do a good deed daily" -- as well as the religious, ethical, and philosophical traditions of many diverse cultures bear witness to this. Many good deeds done daily are seeds of a culture of life and love.

Special Needs of Children: Children are greatly affected by disasters; they will need extra **realistic** reassurances (don't promise what you can't deliver.) Expect them to be afraid -- 4 common fears are death, darkness, animals, and abandonment. Refusing to discuss such fears with children will only intensify their concerns; encourage them to talk about their feelings or otherwise express them through activities such as play acting or painting. Their feelings won't go away if adults refuse to talk about them, if repressed, eventually they will come out, usually in a negative way. Pretending that problems don't exist only makes them worse. Physical reactions like nightmares, vomiting, headaches, or emotional reactions like refusing to eat, getting upset easily, feeling guilty or neglected, are very common reactions to severe stress. Kids may regress to earlier behaviors like bed wetting or wanting a special toy. When you talk with your children, listen to how they say what they say. Watch them at play -- with other children, and with their toys. Repeat information & reassurances many times; answer their questions as much as you can. Hold your child, provide comfort (touching is very important for children during stress). Spend extra time with them before going to bed. Don't hesitate to seek help from friends, family, schools, religious organizations, or support groups. Caution: the stress reactions of your kids will be a source of stress for you. Don't take your stress out on your kids. (Source: Virginia Cooperative Extension & tornado disaster info.)

When a disaster happens: Take care of first things first. Immediate threats are the obvious & threatening: fire, freezing cold, medical emergencies, severe weather, industrial-chemical-pipeline explosions. Medically fragile people, the elderly, and families with young children are especially vulnerable in disasters. Check on your neighbors! It may be necessary to set up heated shelters in homes or public buildings during winter emergencies, or for people to stay with neighbors. **Be**

realistic in your expectations. Things may not get back to normal instantly. It will take time for the situation to recover and the burden may be on each community to rescue itself. Encourage dialogue about what has happened. People's emotions may be roller-coastering; it will help (a lot!) to be able to talk about the event and how it has impacted their lives, for better or for worse. Encourage dialogue (organize opportunities for this to happen). But remember: rumors abound in disaster situations, and should be judged guilty until proven true. Beware of spreading false information that creates public anxiety.

Learn some relaxation techniques: take several slow deep breaths, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth, while thinking calm and peaceful thoughts (or prayers). Challenging events such as major disasters make demands on our "best natures". It's vital to determine the important actions to be taken in response to the disaster, but people may have different ideas about what is important and should be tackled first (this is true in families, neighborhoods, businesses, governments). Understanding this potential for disagreement helps manage the situation. Leaders must be patient in their interactions with others; they must understand that they are as vulnerable to these stress reactions as anybody else. Be aware of the tendency to resort to bad habits when you are under stress. Remember that "haste makes waste." Wisdom, daydreaming, & risk taking can reveal options that you never felt possible.

Be pro-active and hopeful. If there are things that need to be done to help put things back to normal, then do them. Try not to be swamped by details (while remembering that often the devil is in those details). Keep your eyes on the big picture and what has to happen in order to ensure the health, safety, security, and wellness of your family and neighborhood. Think "outside the box", be open to creative solutions to shortages, failed public services, or problems in the marketplace. Even small actions that promote stability and preparedness can affect the ultimate outcome of this event, for better or for worse. What you and your family do (and what you don't do!) will be important not only for your own family, but also for your entire community. Artists, entertainers, musicians, and theater groups should expect that their services will be in great demand, ditto for plumbers, doctors, mechanics, gardeners, nurses, mothers, priests, tailors, engineers, electricians, and many other skills, trades and services. (Librarians will be major heroes!) There will be plenty of work to be done, and it will help if the work is as smart as possible. You won't be able to get through this safely and securely all by yourself: you will need your community, and your community will need you.

Morale is critical during hard times. Draw on all the resources available to you to bolster morale in yourself, your family, and your neighborhood. After attending to any immediate and pressing emergencies of the disaster, invite your neighbors for a potluck dinner. Use this as a time to talk with them about how your community will meet this grave challenge. Many people find strength in religious, ethical, cultural, and philosophical traditions. These beliefs can be structures of support to carry people through hard times. If your family has religious or devotional practices, do not neglect them under the pressure of events in a crisis. If your family doesn't have any religious or devotional practices, you should think about getting some.

Honesty is the best policy. Leaders must be prudent in their responses, because poor leadership can make a disaster much worse, aggravating an already bad situation. Resist the dead end path of authoritarianism. The best and most effective leadership in a crisis is servant leadership. Bad news

should not be concealed. Lies, half truths, making promises that can't be kept, and evading the issues or their consequences are sure and certain destroyers of leadership credibility. (It is also essentially immoral to not warn the public of hazards.) Beware of those who resort to politics and scape-goating in their disaster response; those who do this run the risk of being suspected of bad faith or of attempting to shift blame from themselves onto others. The time for apportioning blame (if this can be done) is after the recovery is well underway, not during the on-going progress of the disaster.

"The world will be saved by Beauty." Civilization doesn't just happen by accident, we have to work at it. If we keep practicing, we will eventually get good at it. In the meantime, everybody must do their part to maintain community and support the common good, especially during a disaster. You will start re-creating a safe and secure community when you yourself decide that you will be a good neighbor. Like charity, building community begins at home, it starts with you. In a disaster, you may feel that you have lost control over your situation. But building community is something you can do, right here, right now, in the place where you are -- whether or not the electricity works, you have a job, or the buses are running. Nobody is an island. Think of your neighborhood as your village, and discover anew the truth that we have learned many times in history: united we stand, divided we fall, cooperation is as important as competition. (During a disaster, cooperation is much more important than competition.) Don't leave anybody behind, there is room in the boat for everybody. And let's remember this good advice as we rebuild: we can do better next time!