

The Human Face of Disaster

Recovery Information for Human Service Workers in Disasters



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This information sheet outlines how all workers involved in disaster can contribute to human recovery. It summarises changes likely to occur in communities and people during the recovery period, and offers suggestions for helping people in crisis.

People are the focus for recovery from disaster at all times. Regardless of their role, each person in a disaster area can influence the feelings of those they interact with, and how well their recovery proceeds. Each worker has a unique opportunity to soften the blow of disaster for those encountered in the course of the recovery process.

Disaster

- changes people and communities
- can disrupt the connection between past, present and future for people and communities
- can destroy tradition and things of historical importance
- can make people and communities feel powerless, helpless and dependent
- creates confusion and obscures the total picture
- can disrupt and split groups, communities, families and friendships
- causes great damage and disruption in a short time
- undermines trust and confidence
- can be violent forces—human or natural
- creates threat and danger
- is impulsive and impersonal

Recovery

- assists in developing a new future
- provides opportunities to cope with the present, re-connect with the past and set goals for the future
- builds upon tradition and history
- helps people take charge of their lives, make plans and decisions, and gives the means to reconstruct their community
- provides information about the whole process, so informed decisions and plans can be made
- helps people understand each other, reestablishes old networks, supports new groups and integrates them into the community
- allows time for re-establishment, for the repercussions of disaster to emerge in the lives of individuals, families and communities and to provide the right help as needs arise
- fosters these at every stage and in all its activities
- is built by careful, skilled coordinated human actions
- provides care and concern
- is aided by workers who are considerate, understanding and helpful, whatever their role.

Community change following disaster

Disasters occur to people who live and work together, and are joined by their shared involvement. It starts a process which

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recovery workers must understand and adapt to in order to be effective. Community recovery is essential to personal recovery.

Normal community relationships are suspended at the time of the disaster impact and replaced by those devoted to survival. Disaster events may even undermine some relationships.

In the immediate aftermath, people are often disoriented and confused; this is followed by intense feelings of closeness, support and care. Everyone feels as one. Those who did not go through it are seen as outsiders.

The oneness based on survival begins to break down once the immediate crisis is passed. Differences between people become charged with emotion. Things are said and done which cause misunderstanding, suspicion, disappointment and tension.

Cleavages and conflicts tend to appear between any groups or organisations that do not take pains to understand each other. This prolongs the recovery process.

After disaster, communities have to coordinate three separate systems:

- Pre-disaster organisations with their own tasks and traditions
- The recovery system coming from outside via the disaster plan
- New organisations emerging from the disaster, often voluntary or informal and in response to specific needs.

Each of these systems has an essential part to play. Competition and conflict may occur unless these systems communicate, share ideas and work together with mutual respect.

Communities are much closer after disaster. Feelings and attitudes are magnified as many people feel the same things at the same time and reinforce each other.

This provides powerful support and helps recovery, but it can also lead to community cycles of enthusiasm-disillusionment-despair.

Grief, anger, depression can affect the whole community. Clear decision making is harder in such a climate.

But communities always have members who understand their workings and can help communication and problem-solving. It is important to incorporate these people (even if informally) into the recovery process.

After disaster, communities are liable to feel isolated, forgotten and not understood. Promoting understanding and communication with the wider community assists recovery by giving a sense of support.

Community recovery can be assisted if each worker, whatever his or her role:

- is clear about their job and responsibilities
- knows their organisation's tasks and responsibilities
- understands their place in the recovery system as a whole
- does not react personally to emotional encounters with community members
- passes on information about services, facilities, assistance to community members and informs other recovery workers of observations and needs.

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Personal responses

Most people, workers included, are affected in some way and at some stage by involvement in a disaster. They may show few or many of the possible responses. Getting over them takes time but usually results in personal growth and increased maturity.

Short term responses (days to weeks)

Although people rarely lose control, in the days following disaster they may have difficulty with planning, decision-making, setting priorities or anticipating future needs. They may feel disoriented, confused or uncertain about the future. Emotional reactions may be postponed or displaced onto apparently unimportant things.

Helping short term responses

Sensitivity to loss of privacy and the experience of dependence of affected people is needed to initiate recovery. People need to feel their dignity and independence are respected, but that others are available to help plan, solve problems and make decisions.

They should not be hurried or talked down to, but seen as normal, competent people dealing with a temporary disruption to their normal functioning.

Medium term responses (weeks to months)

In the weeks and months after the disaster people may go through a wide range of emotions, including shock, fear, grief, sadness, anger, uncertainty and insecurity about the future. There are also strong feelings of altruism, togetherness and concern. It is a time of intense, changing emotions.

Political or other community events cause strong emotional reactions. There is a tendency for emotions to be expressed via practical problems or other events in their

lives such as to blame those providing services for things over which they have no control.

People are often overloaded or under constant stress for many months in the recovery period. Health may deteriorate, accidents increase and relationships become tense. Often these problems develop slowly without those concerned noticing because of their preoccupation with other, more pressing, events.

The inequality of the disaster's effects on people leads to jealousy, rivalry and changes in friendship networks. Misunderstanding and confusion are common, together with doubt and scepticism about what can be trusted and accepted.

Helping medium term responses

Workers can help in this stage by not taking emotional reactions personally, letting people talk themselves out wherever possible, assisting them to concentrate on the task in hand, explaining the recovery problems and ensuring they are aware of all that is available.

Long term responses (months to years)

For many people, some effects of the disaster only become obvious after a year or longer.

They involve economic hardship, effects of living under stress for a long period, poor health, depression, relationship problems, problems with children's development or behaviour, loss of leisure and recreation, loss of friendship networks, loss of sense of direction in life, continuing disturbing memories of the disaster.

People may feel isolated from friends and family because their continuing concern with it is not understood. The community may have undergone changes and no longer

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feels the same as the one they knew, so they feel isolated at home as well.

Many aspects of marital and family life which may have been postponed because of other demands, now come to the fore, often in the form of crises.

Helping long term responses

Being mindful of these problems early in the recovery period enables workers to anticipate them and assist individuals and the community to plan for these future needs as well as meeting immediate ones. Long term responses can be reduced where people are informed and helped to keep track of aspects of their lives that are liable to be neglected in early stages of recovery.

Personal recovery strategies

- encourage use of all available personal service facilities
- support general health, education and welfare programs in the community
- encourage recreation and leisure activities at personal and social levels
- support religious, cultural or social symbols of recovery.

Being part of the recovery system

Many services, agencies and people are required to contribute to recovery. Some have specific jobs that only last a short time; others are involved for long periods, but in different ways.

The recovery system itself is developed in response to the specific disaster on the basis of existing plans.

For affected people, the recovery system not only represents help but also the difficulties and frustration of the disaster. They view it as a whole and hold one part responsible for the deficiencies of another.

Coordination and efficiency of the recovery system are not only necessary for its own functioning, but provide a powerful symbol of the recovery process itself.

The understanding and support shown by members of the recovery system to disaster affected people will help them to resume their lives and minimize any adverse consequences.

In order to bring this about, all workers need to understand the various parts of the disaster system, their roles, how to gain access to other services, communication channels and areas of responsibility. This enables them to help people in ways beyond their specific role.

For further advice contact: Lifeline 13 11 14
Canberra Connect 13 22 81