

# THE RESPONSE TO DISASTER OF INDIVIDUALS & FAMILIES WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITY

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## Abstract

In a natural disaster situation the predominant experience is confusion. It occurs because disastrous events, by their very nature, disrupt the expected familiar pattern of life. The physical environment is usually drastically altered; sometimes it is almost unrecognizable. Death, injury or the threat of them, introduce new and powerful experiences of danger. Evacuation and the influx of combatant and relief workers, replace ordered and familiar community life with a disoriented, emotional mass of people.

In this, as in any situation of confusion, people fall back on what is familiar, to orient themselves. This means they may

not immediately recognise what is new and unique to the disaster. They tend to focus on definite, tangible problems. The overwhelming physical needs are quite rightly the first to be addressed. Many physical requirements have to be met in a matter of hours. When concentrating on providing necessary services, it is difficult to be understanding of the new personal and community responses that take place.

## Short Term Human Responses to Disaster

In order to understand human responses to disaster, it is first necessary to identify what people may be responding to. The physical event and consequent disruption are the most obvious features of any disaster and form the focus around which a host of changes occur. Any of these changes in non-disaster circumstances could constitute a serious challenge to a person's accustomed lifestyle. When they all happen unpredictably and at once, it is to be expected that there will be considerable variation in individual responses and the timing of these responses, because people differ according to which aspects of the situation are most disturbing to them and demanding of their coping skills. The responses can be powerfully influenced

by other factors in individual and family life, pre-existing problems, transition stages of birth, children moving through important developmental phases, marriage crises, job changes, etc. or the specific experiences of recovery.

Among the new and uncomfortable experiences to be dealt with by both those directly affected and the recovery workers, are:

1. The encounter with the threat to life and safety, possibly for the first time, together with the experience of violent natural forces emphasising man's comparative weakness.
2. Grief for the loss of people, possessions, security, environment, history.
3. Separation from loved ones, friends and familiar acquaintances because of relocation or enforced long working hours.
4. Unwanted and unanticipated relocation to an unfamiliar environment or unfamiliar accommodation. Isolation may also occur if transport, neighbours and facilities have been disrupted.
5. Feelings of powerlessness may arise when newcomers and bureaucrats decide what is to be done. People may feel detached from their community, just when they have most need of it. Alternatively, they may feel a compulsive need to expend all their energy in re-building, to the detriment of their own family.
6. On a more personal level, people may, for the first time in their lives, experience a compulsive need to talk about their experiences, difficulty in thinking and planning and unpredictable bursts of emotion. This may lead to feelings of no longer being in control of themselves. They may also be disturbed to find the return of behaviour patterns from earlier stages of their lives.
7. People frequently feel strong urges of altruism and for helping others. Sometimes this may lead to inappropriate behaviour and rejection; alternatively it may lead to a quite new sense of importance and belonging.

These are some of the important experiences the disaster situation may



present. They are all intense, emotionally demanding and frequently quite new. People have to cope with them at a time when they are physically exhausted and have lost many of their customary supports. All such experiences take time to come to grips with and resolving them involves a number of stages.

Not only are people having to deal with multiple different experiences, but with the fact that they are occurring simultaneously and make conflicting demands. This prevents them from being with adequately and may lead to a confused state, where even simple stresses become major problems. Inadequate resolution of these issues lays the basis for some of the long term human problems that follow disasters.

**Short term responses** are those occurring in the days or weeks following the disaster. In general, they tend to be specific and identifiable and usually have a fairly obvious relationships to the events. They are easier to recognise than longer term responses and they often involve states which fluctuate or change rapidly of their own accord. Many quite severe reactions which might incapacitate the person for a time, may be shortlived and will seem to disappear. However, it should not be thought that this means the person is over their difficulties. Rather, it probably indicates they are moving into another phase or the long and complex process of reconciliation with important life events. Short term responses can be divided into a number of different categories:

#### SHORT TERM EFFECTS EXPERIENCED FROM DAYS TO WEEKS AFTER THE DISASTER

- Task:**
- \* absorbing the events
  - \* re-orienting and adapting
- Effects:**
- \* shock – disorientation – bewilderment
  - \* stress – competing demands (practical, personal, social)
  - \* emotional reactions – confusing, fluctuating feelings
  - problems thinking, decision making
  - change to or loss of personal context and identity
  - \* social – altruistic unity, disillusionment, various changes in type of cohesion.

1. **Shock Effects.** The sudden, dramatic events, the threat of actual harm or loss, and the radical change in the environment, all create an impact which many people cannot immediately absorb. As a result, they may develop a variety of shock reactions. More severe reactions consist of being dazed and disorientated, feeling numb and confused, not knowing what to do, being unable to make decisions and plans. There may be involuntary recall of distressing imagery, preoccupation with past events and a compulsive interest in the disaster.

2. **Stress Effects.** Stress builds up when a person has to meet physical, emotional or psychological demands beyond his capacities. There are many features of the disaster situation which cause stress. Short term stress responses include physical and mental over-activity, inability to switch off, over involvement in work, not recognising or feeling need for rest, sleep, relief, food or social support.

Stress may also be expressed as confusion, inefficiency, difficulty with priorities and organisation, forgetting, inability to think clearly, forgetting the names of familiar things or people, talking too much or too little.

Physical effects include changes in eating, sleeping, alcohol use and smoking, nausea, aches and pains, headaches, digestive problems and tiredness.

Emotional effects include irritability, feelings of tension, sudden changes of mood, feeling overwhelmed alternating with enthusiasm, inability to relax, impatience, intolerance and pre-occupation.

Interpersonal manifestations of stress are excessive need for personal support by others or alternatively, withdrawal from contact and a need to be alone. Other expressions are poor communication, uncertainty and rejection of help.

3. A great variety of *emotional reactions* may occur, sometimes in quick succession or simultaneously. For people who have led reasonably normal lives, this sudden intensification of their emotions can be confusing, frightening and bewildering, leading to a tendency to suppress or deny them. Some of these emotions are:

- \* Helplessness in the face of the practical tasks to be done, changes to be adjusted to and uncertainty about the future.
- \* Anger at what has happened, why it happened, of feeling helpless and in need of emotional and practical assistance (maybe the first time in one's life), at the consequent shame, indignities, involvement with bureaucracies and the inevitable injustices. These angry feelings may be directed at those trying to help or those not affected or not as badly affected by the events of the disaster.
- \* Fear of the future, of losing business, lifestyle, or friends or family moving away. There may be fear of being left alone and losing control of one's life or feelings.
- \* Disappointment and a sense of failure that things have gone to badly

wrong and blaming oneself for things beyond one's control.

- \* Guilt feelings are common and may come from regrets about things not done, that one is worse off or better off than other people around one.

4. **Thinking and Planning.** As already indicated, people's ability to understand, analyse, evaluate, plan, make judgements and other important cognitive processes are impaired. Some people, particularly those in shock, may need considerable help to do simple tasks such as filling in forms, working out what their immediate needs are and deciding in what order they should tackle the many tasks before them. Others are well able to undertake their familiar routine tasks, but may have difficulty coping with the unfamiliar new demands of the situation. They may need assistance to set priorities, make decisions and develop strategies to solve problems. There is a tendency for people under stress, or who feel out of their depth, to retreat into familiar tasks which they know they can do, instead of tackling the difficult issues. These problems can particularly affect workers in disaster.

5. **Change or Loss of Personal Context and Identity.** People's sense of who they are is closely bound up with the familiar aspects of their environment. These include places, features of the landscape, people, routines, customs and habits. When these are disrupted, some people may experience feelings of dis-orientation, confusion about themselves, not belonging anymore, no longer feeling it is 'their' community. Some may feel they have 'lost touch' with themselves, their lives, their jobs, their homes or other family members.

Although such feelings may be hard to define, they have a big impact on people, making them feel anxious and insecure and not able to understand what is happening to them. This in turn may lead to heightened stress or depression. It also increases the sense of confusion and may make it much more difficult for people to get on with the necessary work of dealing with more practical issues, until these experiences are acknowledged.

6. **Social Effects.** In the days and weeks following a disaster, people feel a heightened sense of involvement with their community. They tend to seek out those who have shared the same experiences, spend much time talking and being together in groups, even with people they did not know well before. Intense feelings of comradeship and belonging emerge and may sweep some people up into an over involvement in serving their community at the expense of their own personal

and family needs. This stage is sometimes referred to as one of euphoria or honeymoon.

A stage of disillusionment and let-down usually occurs after this. People feel disenchanting and disappointed by friends, family, community and recovery workers. They tend to withdraw even to the point of cutting themselves off from the assistance they need. It is in this period of isolation that other adverse reactions may begin to appear. Changes in social cohesion are important, since many of the other reactions people will experience are alleviated through appropriate supportive contact with other people.

### How to Help

It is important for individuals, communities and workers to understand that the management of short term responses, has a vital influence in effecting a positive or negative recovery from a disaster. It is the beginning of the process of reconciliation of the experience. This process may be facilitated or hindered according to the degree it is understood and the way services are accordingly provided.

1. *Information.* One of the most stressful aspects of the experience is confusion, not knowing what to expect, what is normal or when help is needed. Information can be made readily available throughout the disaster area in the form of pamphlets, notices, media releases, newsletters and short talks at public meetings. It should also include specific and accurate statements about what is available and where to seek help. Because, in these circumstances, people do not absorb information easily, it needs to be repeated constantly. People who do not need it at one time, may need it later when they have moved into a new and possibly more difficult phase of their recovery.
2. *Organisation and Direction.* The rapid re-establishment of organisational and decision-making structures helps to alleviate short term responses, provided that they are practical, appropriate, preserve individual and community autonomy and dignity, and provide consultation. At a personal level, this may mean providing support to individuals to assist them to make decisions, plan, set priorities and re-organise their lives. This should, however, sensitively proceed according to the affected person's pace, remembering that even if they do not need help at one stage, they may need it at another.
3. *Outreach.* People tend not to identify their needs clearly nor seek what they need. Frequently circumstances mean that they do not understand what is available, they do not get what they are entitled to or contacts break down.

A tactful, supportive outreach program with trained volunteers who are able to provide follow-up can do much to alleviate these problems, provide referral information and ensure that people do not get lost to the recovery system.

4. *Respect for Privacy.* The convergence upon the disaster situation and the multiple demands means that loss of privacy is common. Even among friendship group, the disaster tends to make everyone more open to and involved with each other. This can be a serious problem to individuals and families who are not used to such a lifestyle. Respect for privacy, therefore, has to be balanced against outreach and follow-up. Privacy may be most effectively protected when respect for it is incorporated into the helper's style of interaction with the affected people.
5. *Counselling and Support Services.* While trained staff should be available to provide these services, many people will look to others, such as community, social service, welfare or other known local workers for support. The person selected by the client is the best one to give help and may eventually lead to negotiation of a referral to a more appropriate person. Accepting the initial support role may be a preliminary stage to referring the necessary follow-up referral service needed by the person.

Trained counselling services should be integrated into the network of other services, with staff available to consult and support other workers so enabling them to have the confidence to accept tasks that go beyond traditional roles. Integration is also necessary in order to avoid conflicting messages, contradictions or lack of understanding of roles within the recovery system.

6. *Worker Support and Debriefing.* The often overwhelming demands made by a disaster on those working in it, can lead to serious personal consequences. People cease to do their jobs as well as they should, or they may find themselves unable to respond with care, patience and concern for the human experience of those affected. Working in disasters can also have a detrimental effect on people's personal or professional lives lasting for years. Support and psychological debriefing during times of high stress can avoid or alleviate many of the negative effects, if provided by trained staff. Support and debriefing occur when there are opportunities for workers to share their experiences with others in an atmosphere of confidentiality, respect and understanding and where they gain information that their efforts are recognised and valued by those who are important to them, especially their superiors.

### ASSISTING SHORT TERM RECOVERY

**Provide: Information about what to expect**

- \* physically
  - \* emotionally
  - \* family
  - \* community
- \* **Organisation and direction**  
\* **Outreach and opportunities for people to talk about their experiences**  
\* **Counselling and support services**  
\* **Worker support and debriefing**

**Respect need for privacy:**

- \* physical
- \* personal
- \* emotional

### MEDIUM TERM RESPONSE TO DISASTER

Medium term responses are those reactions which occur in people affected by a disaster, from a period commencing some weeks after the event, through to twelve to eighteen months later. Although the post-disaster setting in a community is one of constant change, it is possible to identify a significant shift after the first few weeks. By this time the most pressing physical demands have been satisfied, affected people have found secure accommodation, immediate needs for continued life have been met, and routines for work, school and family life have been re-established. While the evidence of the disaster is still around, life can be described as 'returning to normal'. Combatant agencies are winding-up their services; relief agencies are scaling down their presence.

One of the first issues to arise in this medium term, is the disorientation resulting from the carrying on of normal patterns of life, in the midst of evidence of the disaster. This can sometimes lead to feelings of unreality, as people continue their lives. While the flurry of activity during the emergency is draining and confusing, it does allow people to come to grips with the fact that something extra-ordinary has happened.

When things settle down, however, it can be hard to know what to do with all the feelings generated by the disaster. While it is difficult enough to cope with them in the midst of the unusual events, at least they fit in with what is going on. But later, many people do not feel justified in continuing to have strong emotional reactions. This leads to a different type of confusion to that of the immediate aftermath, based as it is frequently on overload.

### The Disaster Setting in the Medium Term

There are several key features of the disaster setting in the months after the event, which shape many of the reactions.

1. *The Administrative Setting:* Those who have suffered substantial loss, experience a seemingly interminable process of filling in forms, making claims, applications and chasing-up



matters. Later, there are the problems associated with rebuilding and redevelopment. Although these are exhausting and taxing enough under normal circumstances, for these people, each one serves as a painful reminder of the loss and disruption they have suffered. Thus, there is an emotional dimension to these tasks, which greatly increases their stressfulness.

2. *The Social Setting:* As time passes after the disaster, people begin to differ widely in regard to the continuing significance and impact of the disaster. Some are affected more than others, some prefer to try and forget, while others need to talk about it. Those who have suffered loss, continue to require support of many types, while others wish things to return to normal as soon as possible. Because of the high continuing stress levels, these differences become tensions and serve to undermine the network of support that operated before the disaster.

In addition, the wider population resumes its life and the affected community may feel forgotten, as the media return to the more newsworthy matters and new political issues surface. This adds a sense of isolation and disappointment to the other existing feelings. On a more personal level, people begin to find that their friends are relatives outside the disaster area, are tiring of hearing about it, or may even be saying such tactless things as 'When are you going to put it behind you and get on with life?' or 'Can't you stop talking about it, we are sick of hearing about it.' This means they have to turn back to the already beleaguered community, for help and support.

3. *The Physical Setting:* In the early post-disaster period, the effects of the damage and disruption are assayed, in relation to the current situation; planning proceeds on this basis. But as the seasons change and time passes, successive new consequences are revealed and seem to pile on top of each other. For example, the first rains after a bushfire bring a black quagmire that makes life impossible for people in temporary accommodation.

Also, burnt soil erodes readily. As the season progresses, the failure of new pasture to grow becomes evident.

Many results of the disaster take several months to appear, and although they are obvious to planners and community leaders, they may not have been anticipated by residents busy coping with their own affairs. Thus, each new stage becomes a painful new realisation.

4. *The Time Setting:* As time passes, it eases some pains, enables people to adjust to new situations and to become adjusted to changes. But time also brings to the fore, successive painful reminders of life before the disaster. Most obvious is the anniversary of the disaster itself, which rekindles many of the feelings. The first heavy rain after a flood, or the first strong wind or hot day after a fire, all bring back the fears and memories, regardless of the other circumstances. If the summer after the bushfire is dry, it promotes anxiety. If the winter is wet, people think of the growth and when the grass dries, they fear fire. If there is little rain, they fear drought and heightened fire conditions.

Time also brings the birthdays and other regular events of the year; people naturally think back to the same events in the previous years and again they serve as painful indicators of the disruption and loss of their lives.

5. *The Personal Setting:* Life for most people in a disaster affected community, is greatly changed. For those who have suffered loss there are all the tasks involved in re-building and re-organising their lives. But many other sections of the community experience disruption. Local government and service providers, tradesmen and other workers, are put under constant pressure to meet the continuing needs. Children and adults are all preoccupied with monitoring what is happening in their community, and accepting the past. There are apprehensions about the future, disappointments and disillusionment, stresses and strains, and close relationships are overloaded, leading to feelings of isolation and conflict.

This is the time when relationship problems which have been successfully accommodated under normal circumstance, emerge in the stress of the medium term, and lead to serious difficulties, arguments, separations or conflicts.

This may happen in marriages, between parents and children, brothers and sisters, members of the extended families, friends and work-mates. The very personal networks which should provide the support and assistance to get through this difficult time, often become the source of even further problems

6. *The Wider Setting:* Life also goes on in the rest of the environment. Impending changes take place, new problems emerge, political decisions are made, other tragedies occur. Economic circumstances may change, regardless of the disaster, patterns of employment may change, as a direct result of it. Accidental deaths, terminal

illness, suicides or other dramatic events, all impinge upon a community already stressed and overloaded. The effect of these continuing events, is exaggerated and tends to become confused with the disaster itself. Recovery problems are complicated, and time and energy are dissipated in an increasingly complex situation.

These are some of the aspects of the total post-disaster setting, which continue to evolve and impose constraints on the process, of coming to terms with the disruption it has caused. They interfere with, and shape people's responses, but they also throw-up changing challenges, all of which require ingenuity and emotional energy to meet.

On-going community, family and personal processes provide the essential framework in which to understand medium term responses; since they are no longer only responses to the disaster, as is the case in the short-term. They are responses to the accumulating repercussions and consequences to the disaster and to a changed ability to meet the ongoing requirements of ordinary life.

However, it is the disaster that provides the focus for the responses; it can also provide the framework through the recovery system, to supplement the services available, to assist people through these difficult months.

#### Medium Term Personal Responses

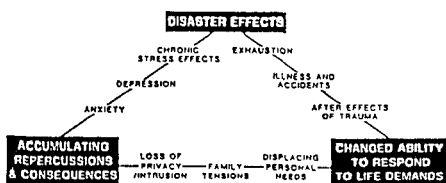
The responses which occur in people in this period, can be divided into a number of headings, indicative of the different areas of life affected, and the various demands occurring.

1. *Overwork, exhaustion, burn-out:* The excitement of the early weeks, often establishes work patterns with insufficient recreation and rest. Because of the overwhelming task of reconstruction and reduced resources, there is a tendency for these patterns to persist through the medium term. Work becomes a refuge from other more difficult emotional, or relationship problems. People get into a vicious circle of reduced efficiency, increased effort and reduced quality of work.
2. *Chronic Stress Effects:* The acute stress problems of the short-term change in character as months go by, with high continuity stress levels. Tension, irritability, sleeplessness, increased use of alcohol, cigarettes, medications continue. Inability to relax, withdrawal from interpersonal contact or avoidance of being alone, also occur. Emotional relationships are put on hold, until other pressing needs are met. A variety of psychosomatic problems begin to occur, as stress continues. They include digestive disorders, headaches, back aches,

menstrual disorders, excessive tiredness, skin conditions, and sexual difficulties.

These problems indicate that with time, stress becomes distress and without help can lead to significant deterioration of health.

3. *Illness and Accidents:* Both increased susceptibility to infections, as well as the appearance of more serious illnesses, are associated with severe stress and are seen following disasters. Accidents also tend to occur during periods of communal stress, such as changes in weather, anniversary periods, or other times of difficulty.
4. *Depression:* This is a major problem as months go by. Not only is it an indication of the magnitude of the task, but it's also a result of the disappointments and sense of despair, the occurs when there are inadequate social supports available. Many people become more private in their depression, and even hide their feelings from immediate family members. The isolation is increased by the feeling that people should not let their unhappiness show, because after all, everyone is in the same boat and it would be 'letting the side down'.



Medium Term Responses to Disaster

5. *After-effects of Trauma:* Where people have suffered threat to life, personal injury or other traumatic experiences, they are liable to emerge in the medium term in the form of nightmares, fears, flashbacks and preoccupations with the past. This causes confusion and fear, as people tend to imagine that such things should fade quite quickly. Often there is a tendency to try to control such reactions by shutting them off.  
This tend to make people withdrawn, emotional or irritable and liable to outbursts of temper.
6. *Anxiety:* This is a common reaction. The actual fears of the disaster, are often pushed aside by the immediate demands of safety at the time, and by the high activity levels of the aftermath. But with time, as there is some relaxation, the fears return, but often no

in direct association with the actual memories of danger. Or they may mean for some people, that the disaster has undermined their sense of security and safety. A common expression is fear or reluctance to go far from home, meet new people, or try new things.

7. *Displacing Personal Needs:* Both physical demands and emotional stresses, encourage people to put aside a variety of personal needs, such as recreation, relaxation, time for hobbies and interests. People get out of the habit of doing many of the things that are rewarding and satisfying to them. They also ignore difficulties that they would have remedied quickly, and as a consequence, small problems turn into big ones and become difficult to solve.
8. *Intrusion, Privacy and Isolation:* The comradeship and closeness of the immediate aftermath together with the influx of disaster related agencies, such as outreach, insurance, social service, and many other groups, create a new lifestyle of involvement with each other. In the medium term, there are continuing requirements to deal with others, but new relationship networks build-up, that often leave people feeling they have lost their privacy, and their personal lives are subject to constant intrusion. Some people have been known to shut themselves in their homes to avoid a well-meaning friend knocking at the door. Lack of privacy takes away the essential space, in which to work through losses, come to terms with fears, or accept change.

At the same time, the contact that does occur is often around practical issues, gossip or criticism and complaint. People then feel they lack opportunities to share their more intimate experiences; this can leave them with a sense of isolation, in the midst of all the interaction.

9. *Family Tensions:* The multiple stresses and strains are inevitably exposed in families. Unless there are opportunities to communicate, understand each other and solve problems difficulties begin to build up after the disaster. Following the immediate aftermath, family members often settle down to adjusting to a new environment. Parents are busy and preoccupied, children recognise this and make fewer demands. Husbands and wives endeavour to support each other. However as the months pass, the children begin to make demands, or in the case of adolescents, may turn outside the family for support. The parents find themselves preoccupied and isolated and then misunderstandings and disappointments develop.

To begin with, these problems are within the normal range, but often the post-

disaster situation tend to undermine problems-solving capacities, and some families find themselves in serious trouble, after a year or so. Marital breakdown, parent/child relationship problems, behaviour and learning problems and delinquency can all occur. Sometimes the processes set in train, do not culminate in clearly identifiable problems, until well over a year, because of the strenuous, though often uncoordinated efforts of family members, to stick by each other.

### Helping Medium Term Responses

The problems outlined above, are only some of those encountered in the first year or two, after a disaster. But they illustrate the interactional character of the stresses, and the developments of difficulties over time. It should not be imagined, that everyone develops disorders, or all families become dysfunctional. Most people do cope. But everyone is subjected to some of the sorts of pressures illustrated, and even if formal assistance is not sought, there is still much that can be done to assist people. The strong tendencies to deny the extent of disruption, to conceal one's own difficulties and to keep up a front before others, create an inaccurate impression of the state of affairs.

However, talking in depth with people, they can describe not only their own, but also the problems being experienced by their friends and neighbours. It is hurtful and aggravating for people to have the difficulties either overstated, or minimised. Yet there are a number of simple measures which can help to create a community atmosphere of concern and care, and in which problems can be tackled.

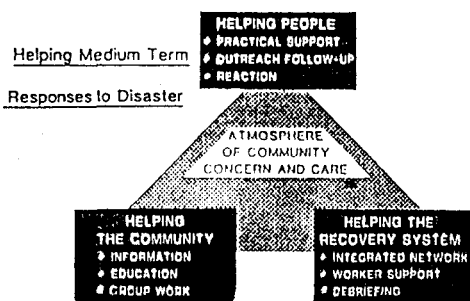
1. *Practical Support:* This can take the form of assistance with many small jobs, which seriously interfere with life. This not only includes older people, but all age-group. Service Club working bees, drop-in centres, child-care facilities, shower and laundry facilities, district public transport are some examples. The effects of such help goes far beyond the practical results, in reducing stress and creating a supportive atmosphere.
2. *Outreach follow-up:* Sensitive and selective outreach and follow-up, may identify people who are too apprehensive of officialdom, to claim the assistance they are entitled to, or who have developed variety of new needs. Sometimes people also require a sympathetic listener, to give them the opportunity to clarify their needs, and often, may need someone else to suggest the kind of help which might be of assistance.
3. *Integrated networks of services:* High stress levels make it difficult to set priorities. The need for personal counselling may become apparent

through an unrelated issue, such as a broken sewer. Or it may be that a welfare worker hears of a bureaucratic mistake. Such a failure to seek help from the right quarters is common. An integrated network, in which workers as diverse as local government, the Department of Agriculture, utilities, government and voluntary welfare agencies, can be of great assistance, if they know what is available, the type of needs people are likely to present and can direct them to appropriate staff.

provide the co-ordination, to bring them together. Local government, health, welfare and other workers, are likely to become aware of people with common needs and interests, who may be unaware of each other. Or they may be able to facilitate an initial opportunity to meet, after which, the group can carry on itself.

occupations. These activities also often symbolise pre-disaster life, which people feel cut-off from. Often they can only reconnect with these aspects of their life, towards the end of the medium term (i.e. towards the end of the second year).

It is important for community and recovery workers to be aware of the need to foster family activities, leisure and recreation activities, clubs, and facilities, children's programs and to encourage individuals to explore new interests. Successful initiatives have included a voucher system for people to dine out, community street drama, anniversary festivals, hobby clubs and social groups.



5. **Information and Education:** People have a continuing need for information about their entitlements, services offered, resources available, community and government programs, local developments and future plans. Basic information needs to be constantly repeated as peoples' receptivity changes with their circumstances; what is not needed at one stage, is required at another, and often people need time to come to terms with needs, before seeking the appropriate assistance. In a disaster aftermath, everything is accompanied by an emotional working-through process, which takes varying lengths of time.

Education can provide information about normal reactions and expectations, especially of children and families, when and where to seek help, self help, and preventative health measures. Such knowledge relieves anxieties and doubt about one's own state, and enables people to take increasing control of their own recovery.

7. **Worker support and debriefing:** Workers in all areas of the recovery have a continuing need for support and debriefing. Often it is only towards the end of the medium term phase, when things are beginning to return to normal, that some of those most deeply involved, start to feel exhausted and burnt-out. If these people are not to be lost to their future work and suffer serious personal disruption, they need opportunities to evaluate and work through their work and its impact on their personal and family lives. People who have worked in a voluntary capacity, are a particularly important group in this respect. Sensitive individual contact with workers trained in psychological debriefing, may be the most appropriate form, especially where the latter have been accepted as part of the recovery system. Another valuable forum is meetings of local workers, with counterparts from other areas who have experienced disaster, or with more centralised disaster managers.

4. **Group Work:** The establishment of groups for a variety of purposes, helps provide opportunities for people to share experiences, give and receive support, and participate in the rebuilding of their community. Groups can be formed for emotional support, practical assistance, planning, coordinating services, gaining or dispersing information, education, psychological debriefing and recreation or social activities. The value of the feeling of belonging and acceptance and of recognising shared problems and experiences, is as important as the actual activities undertaken. Often people need someone to take the initiative and

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## LONG TERM RESPONSES TO DISASTER

The impact of a disaster on adult's and children's lives, is a complex process and continues to have repercussions over a considerable period of time.

The focus is now on responses that become evident predominantly in the second, third and fourth years. It should be emphasised, however, that the responses outlined do *not* always mean that the people concerned are in need of formal mental health services; in fact, the more awareness there is about human responses to disaster in the community, the less these services are likely to be required. Support from community and personal networks may be sufficient, although mental health consultation should be an integral part of recovery services. Although the responses themselves are likely to be widespread among members of the affected community, it is their *intensity* and *pervasiveness* within the life of the individual or family, that indicates the type of help required. In principle, it should be emphasised that *there is no limit to the time in which adverse reactions to a severely disruptive life event may appear, or continue to operate.*

### The Disaster Setting in the Long Term

In the first few years following the disaster, there are a number of features which provide a particular character for the social and personal environment of those involved.

1. *The Physical Setting.* By this time much of the physical damage and disruption is overcome, buildings are being constructed, the landscape is being redeveloped, and new developments are occurring. This activity has a normal optimistic character and may be taken by outsiders as evidence of a phoenix-like community rebirth. However, for many residents, the experience is more complex and confusing. The changes have been forced upon them, and are associated with loss, fear, helplessness and other powerful emotions. Some people feel they have lost the community they belonged to, others that they would prefer the old, less adequate facilities to these new ones. It is not uncommon for people to feel they have lost their roots, or become separated from their past.

People whose houses were destroyed may ask friends not to visit them, as their new house 'feels like a motel', they want to wait until the walls get dirty and it feels lived in. This is a long way from the pride usually felt on moving into a new house. Such experiences are common and indicate that recovery and reconstruction, can be associated with many complex feelings that are not obvious or easily understandable to

outsiders. It is this complex of conflicting feelings that may be a prominent feature in loosening people's sense of attachment to the community, so leading to the many departures during the years after the disaster.

2. *The Social Setting.* In the years after the disaster the community goes through considerable change, all of which services to alter the personal support networks. Tensions arise between those who have suffered loss and those who have not. The latter feel envious of the relief and assistance given and the new houses of the former. Some people, whose houses were singed by bushfires, have said they wished they had been burnt out, so they could start again. However, those who did lose their house, preferred their old smaller house to the new big one. Strong antagonisms and conflicts develop, leading to disruptions in old friendships and networks. People tend to relate to those who have been through similar experiences. This is just one of the factors that cuts across the pre-disaster personal networks. Other factors are, chronic stress effects leading to conflict between neighbours, disagreements about redevelopment, grievances about behaviour during and after the disaster, and disappointments and disillusionments with the recovery process. In the highly charged emotional context of the aftermath, these issues tend to polarize people. However, the changes in personal networks only become evident in the long term, as the community attains a degree of normal functioning.

Another social disruption is caused by the tendency for people to leave the area after the disaster. Many people feel their attachment to the locality so changed by the disaster, that they no longer want to stay, even if this takes one, two or three years to clarify. Some only make the decision to leave, after they have rebuilt and settled back. New people come into the community and add to the sense of change.

People tend to be thrown back on their own personal and family resources under these circumstances, and instead of having a broader support network, it becomes narrower.

3. *The Domestic Setting.* The disaster changes people's feelings about the place, the people and their own houses. Those who did not lose their homes feel dis-satisfied, some respond by building extensions, others lose interest. Those in new homes have difficulty adjusting; some never feel the same attachment as they had for the old house. Some feel the continuity of life is disrupted and that they cannot

connect with their pre-disaster life. People say such things as 'It's as though I never lived before the disaster'. Life goes on, but people become isolated in the demands they have to meet. Marriages come under increasing stress and it is common for each partner to feel that the other is not appreciating all that is being done.

Parents are often so preoccupied with reconstruction, that the developing needs of their children are not identified and responded to. Many families are able to tolerate such stresses for a year or more, but in the second or third years, the disruption begins to show in marital and family problems.

4. *The Personal Setting:* The basis for anyone's adaptation to severe stress is their own continuum of life, in which past and future meet in the present. Past experience is integrated with present realities and directed toward future goals. When severe stress occurs, it disrupts this process. People become pre-occupied with their past experience, which throws its shadow over the present, making future goals seem remote, unattainable or no longer relevant. When this continuum breaks down, and the flow of life is interrupted, problem solving capacities, motivation and purpose are undermined. The future no longer seems to hold promise and the present becomes a harsh, unrewarding obligation.

Figure 1 shows diagrammatically, the process by which experience is progressively integrated in a social context into the life continuum.

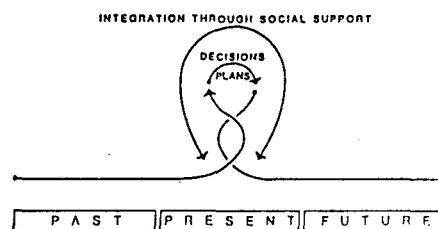
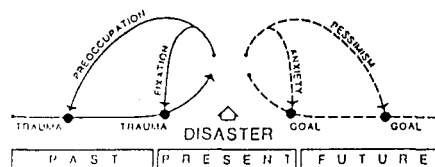


Figure 2 illustrates the breakdown of this process, under severe stress with the consequent preoccupation with the past and loss of contact with the future.



The personal setting in the long term aftermath, is therefore one where excessive external demands are often met at the expense of the internal integration of the disaster related experiences into the life continuum.

## Longer Term Personal Responses

The common feature to the various settings described above, is the loss of the known familiar context of life and its replacement with a new, changing one, with a variety of tensions and the lack of positive emotional investment, which follow when people make decisions at their own pace. Simultaneously, there is a high demand for the very human functions which rely on a stable context, namely, the integration of past and future into effective planning and problem solving in the present.

The personal responses evident in the longer term, can be understood against this background. They can be divided into four groups.

1. *Effects of Personal Functioning:* These include changes in the person's ability to cope with both their inner and outer environments.

- (i) Chronic Stress Effects – lowered efficiency and effectiveness, changes in drinking, smoking and recreation patterns, increased psychosomatic illness and susceptibility to infection, greater chance of accidents, increased vulnerability to serious illness.
- (ii) Emotional Maladaptations – depression, anxiety, phobias, feelings of helplessness, insecurity and inferiority, lowered self worth.
- (iii) Personality Changes – some people suffer limited but important changes in their personality, which appear to be long lasting, becoming bitter, envious, disillusioned, demanding and dissatisfied.

2. *Effects on Personal Identity:* These include:

- (i) Loss of relationship to the past, feeling displaced and having lost one's roots or heritage, feeling adrift and unrelated to the environment.
- (ii) Loss of relationships, constriction of social contacts, lack of interest in others, loneliness, withdrawal, rejection of others.

3. *Effects on the Life Continuum:* These can appear in many areas on the person's life.

- (i) Deviations in the developmental process, where important life changes are not dealt with appropriately, but become confused with the other problems. For example, young children commencing school, adolescents young adults seeking work, inexperienced parents with very young children, or older people facing retirement, are likely to find these normal challenges too demanding, leading to unsuccessful adaptations.

(ii) Postponed issues re-emerge. The needs of children, adolescents, spouses or other family members, which are postponed during the short and medium term crisis conditions, now re-appear and require attention. But they often do so in the form of conflict, hostility and relationship breakdown. Postponed personal needs also re-appear, such as for recreation, privacy or humour.

(iii) Preoccupation or fixation on past events. Some people with traumatic events in their past, which had been adequately dealt with, suddenly find themselves constantly remembering to the point where they are unable to concentrate on the present. Examples are serious illnesses, life threatening events, rape, violence, marital trauma, childhood events.

4. *Effects of Social and Family Life:* These can be anticipated from the above and include:

- (i) Chronic family and marital problems, disharmony, conflict, loss of cohesion, mutual resentment.
- (ii) Interpersonal conflict and dissatisfaction with acquaintances, neighbours and friends.
- (iii) Disillusionment, loss of attachment and belonging to the community, wanting to leave and forget and start again, or withdrawal.

## Significance of Long Term Responses

It is important to state that while these responses can be anticipated to be very widespread throughout a disaster affected community, this does not mean everyone becomes a psychiatric invalid. Rather, they should be seen as demands and challenges which most people will rise to and draw on past and present strengths, their capacity to learn and their emotional resilience to find solutions.

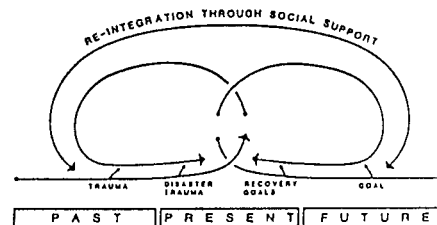
However, it is important that disaster managers, recover personnel and community workers understand that those for whom they are working, face difficulties that go well beyond the demands of normal life, for a period of years after the disaster. The fact that most people are unable to say exactly how they have coped with the problems, does not mean they have not been serious, rather it is evidence of their robust nature.

While the nature of frequency of these responses should not be overstated, it should also not be forgotten that recovery from disaster involves considerable suffering for those involved, both in ways and time apparently quite removed from the disaster itself. It is this recognition which will enable workers to respond sensitively and promote programmes to assist the coping process.

## Helping Long Term Responses

1. *On a personal level.* Everyone who comes in contact with a disaster affected person, can provide immediate and effective help, even if only to a limited extent. This is done through *demonstrating a sincere, respectful interest in whatever aspect of their experience they may wish to share.* Expressing experiences in words to an interested listener, is the most effective way of assimilating them into the life continuum. A sense that the other person cares, provides the 'safe space' in which integrative talking can take place. This does not mean providing a counselling session; even a short discussion in the course of transacting business, will allow the person to go away feeling supported. Such an element can be incorporated into any activity, bringing contact with disaster affected people, and will more than anything, convey to them the sense that they are part of a caring community.

Figure 3 shows in a diagrammatic way, how such social support facilitates reintegration and re-establishment of the life continuum.



2. *On a programme level.* Because of the complexity and variety of long term responses, adequate help involves providing access to a wide range of services and other activities, so that problems can be dealt with as they arise and healthy functions supported.

- (i) *Community Awareness and Education.* The more people understand about the post-disaster process, the better they can cope with its consequences. In particular, information is needed so that stress effects can be identified and related to the circumstances. There is a tendency for people not to recognize the relationship and problems become more intensified and personalized.

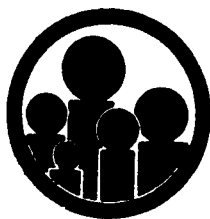
All communication channels should be used, including the media, newsheets and pamphlets. Trained mental health workers can also assist by providing contributions to meetings, planning groups and other committees, to develop the community's awareness of personal responses.



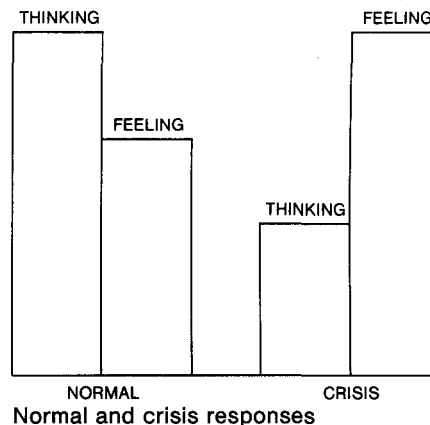
"You can never know what it is like"  
 "I couldn't really believe it was happening"  
 It goes on and on afterwards and won't go away"  
 "Nobody would understand unless they had been there"  
 "Afterwards I was so confused, I couldn't think or even decide the simplest things"  
 I can't recognize anything, it's like being in a wasteland"  
 "It's as though I never existed before, I've lost my past"  
 "The wasteland is as much a state of mind as a place"  
 "When people think you should have got over it, you still can't forget it".

Quotes from disaster affected people included in a brochure being produced by the Victorian State Community Recovery Sub-Committee 1987.

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Normal and crisis responses  
 (from Mitchell and Resnick - Emergency Response to Crisis, Brady, 1981)

Another important facet, is to help people anticipate and prepare for future difficulties, in a non-alarmist manner. Such information, together with suggestions for self-help and referral, need to be repeated frequently, as people differ in when they are ready to receive it.

- (ii) *Primary Care Services.* The full range of community services will become increasingly important in the years after the disaster. Many smaller problems become more important, when there are so many other difficulties. Medical, financial, legal, senior citizens, welfare, education, family and counselling services may be called upon. They will work most effectively in helping long term personal responses, if they see themselves as part of an integrated network. The presenting problem may not be the most important one; cross-referral within the network is often a crucial service. Such co-operation maximizes the quality of care and does much to convey the sense of support that is most important in dealing with personal responses.
- (iii) *Community Network Building.* The facilitation of new groups and activities and their integration into old community structures, will help combat the process of change within personal networks outlined above. New needs and interests can provide the basis for new groups to offer a sense of belonging to people, who have withdrawn from their former circles. Pre-existing groups can be

encouraged to participate in community activities in new ways, to avoid isolation and disengagement. Community development officers and other local government and voluntary workers, can provide a co-ordinating role and bridge the gap between formal and informal groups. The community needs people who will work to promote a new sense of cohesion and identity, which does not try to go back to the pre-disaster situation, but rather includes the disaster as a crucial piece of on-going history. This then serves as a basis for people to resolve their own personal identity issues.

- (iv) *Group Work.* Groups of all sorts provide fruitful opportunities for people to express their feelings, gain better understanding of themselves and others, and receive support. Often, hearing others explain their feelings does more to overcome conflicts and divisions, than more formal problem solving activities. Not everyone will want to participate in group activities; but if meetings are convened to discuss problems, make decisions or provide information, opportunities can be offered for more informal sharing. Often, the presence of a trained mental health worker can assist in making maximum use of meetings and groups. A further benefit is to establish a sense of involvement and responsibility for the community, which helps combat the loss of interest and detachment, that leads people to leave the area.

- (v) *Cultural Activities.* Artistic and theatrical events, remembrance services, anniversary celebrations, street parties and other activities of a symbolic nature, are powerful expressions of a new life and optimism. They help people stand back and survey their community, and become clearer about its strengths and weaknesses. Feelings and attitudes can often be freely expressed in an artistic or dramatic form, even though not readily on a personal basis. All those involved, however, will benefit from such expressions. Services and celebrations offer a sense of belonging and survival, that is important in dealing with many of the long term personal responses.

- (vi) *Participation in Planning and Re-development.* This is a crucial activity to help people feel the community is still theirs, and to minimise the frequent experience that others have come in and taken over and rebuilt it for them. Then it is easy to feel it is no longer theirs. People do not necessarily need to be directly involved, but as long as they can see how the community voice is being heard, they can feel part of the process.

In the post-disaster period, there may be many benefits in relaxing the formal procedures of some processes at all levels, to offer increased involvement to community members, and to convey a sense that the recovery system is sensitive, responsive and human.