

**Emotional Disaster Preparedness:  
A Missing Component in Emergency Preparedness?**

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by Deborah Bier, PhD

During an overview of the literature, I noticed that about 97% of the emphasis in disaster psychology focuses on post-incident assessment, intervention and follow-up. This is important work, and a great contribution to the fields of both psychology and disaster response.

If we're not in a period of active disaster or its direct aftermath, however, we are then in the midst of preparedness activities. For those of us for whom preparedness is the name of the game at the moment, we don't have to wait for a disaster to apply sound disaster psychology.

Right now, we could be extending our work into *Emotional Emergency Preparedness*. Risk reduction and psychological readiness BEFORE an incident is something I believe can make a difference....both in terms of people's willingness to prepare, and to their greater resilience following an incident.

After all: people fail to prepare for disasters not because they don't know how many cans of tuna fish they should store. Yes, practical considerations are real, but I don't believe they are the main stumbling block for the general public.

*Mostly, people don't prepare for emergencies for EMOTIONAL reasons.*

As a culture, we seem just plain resistant to dealing with the eventuality that all of us face an emergency sometime in our lives, be it personal, local, regional, or nation-wide. I think this is fairly widely accepted. Yet, I have found nothing in the literature that nonetheless systematically seeks to address this situation, and create a better foundation of emotional preparedness for disasters.

This is not entirely surprising, since in our culture we don't generally fix things until they're broken. This is why prevention is still so cutting edge -- or almost entirely absent -- in many aspects of the helping professions. I believe the same may be true of disaster psychology.

Yet the literature on psychological resilience is clear: the skills and qualities that predict better recovery from trauma can be cultivated. While natural resiliency varies from person-to-person, improved xxx can be both taught and learned effectively. If ever there was new hope for the future survivors of disasters, then surely this news would be it!

**EVER MORE IMPORTANT IN A POST 9/11 WORLD**

I think this is ever more important today because we have heard so much about 9/11 Post Traumatic Stress. Often, this comes from what may be unreliable media sources that focus on those experiencing the worst reactions, and which fail to report those who are coping well. Therefore, the public is more than ever anticipating that emergencies are eternally emotionally crushing. So, base-line anxiety is high.

Yet, at the same time, people are numbed to messages about emergency preparedness. We see so many images of (both real and pretend) disaster on television, in the movies, newspapers and magazines that many of us become desensitized emotionally. Local alerts can get lost in all the background noise of this type of media over-stimulation.

It's important to diffuse this situation with some solid psychological tools. Otherwise, we will be forever Sisyphus pushing that rock uphill, trying to coach people into better preparedness, yet being eternally blocked by the emotionally-driven obstacles in the way.

To make some strides here, and I introduce what I'll call the foundational activities of Emotional Disaster Preparedness. As a group, they focus on building RESILIENCE, INFORMATION and EMPOWERMENT.

## **8 FOUNDATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF EMOTIONAL DISASTER PREPAREDNESS**

These foundational activities can be deliberately interwoven into all aspects of emergency preparedness training and educational programs. They apply to both the general public, as well as to teaching disaster professionals and trained volunteers. Each of these activities will help speak to the emotional underpinnings of all-hazards planning -- none are specific to any particular type of emergency.

**1. NORMAL ANTICIPATION.** Name and talk about the natural range of feelings people are likely to experience when they think about the possibility of an emergency. These are often, "I feel overwhelmed...I'm afraid I won't know what to do...that I'll freeze/panic...I don't think I'll be able to cope..." This can help start to bring "the elephant in the room" into view.

**2. REDUCE ANXIETY.** Discuss GOOD approaches to reducing anxiety (e.g., keep informed from credible sources, get busy preparing, talk with others for support). Emphasize reducing anxious anticipation and inability to cope through good preparedness. Educate that talking about preparedness for potential emergencies will *decrease* anxiety or panic. Remember: research supports that solid information is the antidote to panic, not its cause. Affirm that a *lack* of well-grounded information actually *increases* anxiety.

**3. WHEN TO WORRY.** People are often afraid that once they starting thinking about emergencies, they will get pulled down in a morass of fear and terror. Discuss *unusual* or *abnormal* responses to anticipatory emergencies (e.g., persistent disturbance in sleeping, eating, working, presence of suicidality, episodes of violence, increased drug/alcohol dependence to manage feelings, growing depression, panic attacks, or inability to carry out normal tasks of daily living). Discuss who is most at risk for these problems (i.e., not most people). Talk about different types of professional help available within the community for that group of people who do experience these types of difficulties.

**4. NORMALIZE POST-DISASTER EMOTIONS.** It is very common to experience a state of shock, confusion, numbness, anger and/or helplessness following an emergency. It is vital to start to discuss this range of normal reactions BEFORE disaster strikes. Knowing that feeling bad -- even VERY bad -- for a period of time is not abnormal or a sign of mental illness helps people become more comfortable engaging in emergency planning discussions. Emphasize that those experiencing this normal range of emotions can still receive help and support. Affirm that people usually do feel better over time.

**5. WHAT RECOVERY IS LIKE.** Talk about what happens emotionally to MOST people following a disaster (they recover with time, and experience little or no lasting emotional damage). This information can be reassuring both before and after a disaster, creating (hopefully, self-fulfilling) expectations for a positive emotional outcome (e.g., "I know over time, things will get better...most people come through and recover; I know I will, too."). Affirm the strength and resilience of the human psyche through personal experience, citing of research, and telling of stories.

**6. TEACH STRESS REDUCTION.** Talk about the need to adopt and regularly practice stress-reducing measures NOW (e.g., being in nature, meditation, exercise, prayer, relaxation protocols, eating well, sleeping enough, social interaction). First learning self-calming techniques only *after* a disaster happens is a recipe for failure. Since stress-reducing methods take time to become a matter of habit, they must be taught and practiced in advance.

**7. GET THE WHOLE FAMILY INTO ACTION.** Encourage family discussions around a plan of action. Arm people with the information they need to either shelter at home and/or to evacuate. Keep the information age-appropriate for children, and talk about what both adults and children can do to be prepared. Encourage families to take stock of their strengths, which would serve to see them through an emergency. Focus on active measures everyone can take together right now.

**8. BUILD FOR MATERIAL RECOVERY.** We place a lot of our security in the goods we own - if we can help prepare to protect or recover their value, it may motivate people to prepare in other ways. Becoming aware there are common obstacles to the recovery process prepares people to overcome them in the future. Teach where to turn for help with insurance adjustment, Federal/State/local aid, and other resources that would be available during recovery. This can speed post-disaster recovery, and increase people's inner strength to meet what disaster may unfold at some unknown future time.

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