

Providing Assistance in the Aftermath of the South Asian Tsunami

The widespread destruction and massive loss of life from the Tsunami will require the support of the worldwide community to help the victims recover. The recovery will not be measured in days, weeks, months, years or even decades, but will likely take generations. The impact will remain within the affected nation's legacy for possibly centuries.

The purpose of this article is to address some of the issues that will need to be considered by those organizing and providing emotional support to the affected populations. This article will also include practical considerations for those working within the disaster areas.

Considering the massive destruction and loss of life, the emotional recovery will proceed at a very different pace than the reconstruction efforts. In fact, for some, the true impact of the loss may not be realized until the victims own personal safety and security has been stabilized. Initial efforts of the victims has likely been focused on survival, determining the fate of missing loved ones, dealing with the recovery of bodies and coping with dehydration, illness, and starvation. Support at this level is best provided by offering assistance in meeting the physical and safety needs, helping to locate or determine the fate of loved ones and to provide a compassionate presence for those suffering terrible losses. Pre-existing and emergent mental health crises may need to be addressed (if resources are available), but the general focus of early support should be in sustaining the population and providing a sense that a support system is being put into place.

To the extent that people are physically able and willing, keeping them involved in various tasks and activities may help them to carry on through these early recovery efforts. Some victims may readily take to caring for orphaned children, or helping the community to clear debris and restore basic functionality. Essentially anything that can be done to empower the impacted population will aid in the emotional recovery.

All support should be carried out in the cultural and spiritual context of the communities being supported. Our own values and belief systems may be irrelevant and if imposed upon victims may further complicate the recovery. For many communities the spiritual beliefs may be the main ingredient in recovery.

Because of the extreme devastation, victims will be dealing with multiple layers of trauma. In a very short time they have been victims, rescuers, grieving family members, newly homeless and may have been involved in body recovery and disposal. Each of these roles has its' traumatic impact and may lead to psychological reactions at various points in the future. Attempting to resolve these reactions too quickly or too soon may lead to even further distress.

Crisis responders should avoid self deploying. They should not travel to the disaster sites unless they are part of an official organized support team. The local governments of the affected areas are reporting difficulty managing the large number of well meaning spontaneous volunteers. Do not travel to any disaster area unless you are responding to an official call for assistance. Keep in mind that many of the areas are dealing with severe water, food and medical supplies. Having to feed and hydrate additional "volunteers" will unnecessarily strain the relief effort.

It is important for governments, relief agencies, and rescue groups to realize the need for support of their personnel. The massive loss of life and destruction of whole families and communities will have significant impact on the personnel assisting the victims. A strong well organized emotional support system for these personnel will be essential to their functionality both during their mission, and for years to come. The organization of the support should be such that every member of the relief team is educated on the potential impact their involvement may have upon them. They should be encouraged to take advantage of the support system that is available to them. All personnel should be screened following their deployment and should participate in post deployment support programs such as defusing, debriefing or other post trauma support programs.

The long term well being of children will need to be addressed. If possible children should return to school or a “school like” setting as soon as possible. Children will need the stimulation and structure that this environment can provide. For children in relief camps, organizing activities and lessons will help to give them needed structure. School curriculums will need to be altered to address the impact of the Tsunami and to educate children on the issues that face their community and their self as they move forward. Model curriculums need to be created and shared with all of the affected regions. Each curriculum should be modified to fit the culture of the community.

Helpful hints for those who are being deployed to impacted regions:

- Prior to travel check for necessary immunizations. Because of the serious risk of disease outbreak all appropriate immunizations should be completed. In the United States there is an organization called Passport Health (www.passporthealthusa.com) which provides immunizations needed for the area of the world one is traveling to. They also provide health information and supplies for travelers. Other health organization may provide similar services. Another important health related website is The United States Government’s National Center for Infectious Diseases Travelers Health Bulletin (www.cdc.gov/travel). Please see the Center for Disease Control’s traveler’s information at <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/tsunamis/humanitarian.asp>. It contains important checklists for those traveling to the disaster area.
- Be aware of the profound emotional impact this activity may have upon you. Arrange for post deployment debriefing if it is not already in place. During the deployment take time to assess your own reactions to what you are encountering. Utilize colleagues to serve as sounding boards and a support system. Keep a diary or journal to help organize your own personal experience. Look out for the well being of your colleagues.
- A disaster area is an extraordinarily dangerous environment. Notwithstanding the issues of disease and contamination, there are many hazards one would not anticipate. This could range from nails, glass and other debris being where they are not expected, to possibilities of structural collapses or debris falling from overhead. Always be aware of what is around you in all directions including underneath and overhead.

- Bring your own supply of personal medications as well as antibiotics. Take at least double the supply you expect to need in case your return is delayed. If you have more than one travel bag, split your supply between the two bags in case one gets lost or stolen. Have a colleague carry a back up supply of any medication which you cannot go without. It may not be possible to obtain medications in the area you are traveling.
- If you expect to be traveling to remote areas a small handheld GPS may be helpful in finding your way back. Bring extra batteries and consider bringing a small solar battery recharger as batteries and electricity may not be available in all areas.
- Two way personal walkie-talkie type radios with a 5 mile range can be helpful for outreach teams if they become separated. They are inexpensive and may be a primary means of team communication if cell phones and land lines are inoperable.
- Be certain to become educated on the cultural and religious issues and customs of the population you are serving. It is very easy to unintentionally offend people if you don't understand their culture.
- Carry copies of your travel documents stored somewhere other than where you are carrying your originals. Also have someone at home and someone else on your team carry a copy so that if the originals are lost or stolen you have some documentation.
- Know your mission, the limits of your mission and who you are serving. If your mission is to be expanded, be sure it is with the approval of the appropriate authorities.
- Finally, your personal safety is essential to the success of your mission. If you take unnecessary risks and become ill or injured you have added to the problem rather than helped.

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