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When a Loved One is in the Midst of Danger

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On May 28, 2009 I was visiting my older brother and his wife in Albuquerque, New Mexico. My sister-in-law's niece, Caroline, teaches on Roatan, an island located off the Caribbean side of Honduras. Caroline had contacted her mother to inform her she had been caught in a 7.1 magnitude earthquake with an epicenter near the islands of Roatan and Utila. The quake was strongly felt in El Salvador, Guatemala and northern Nicaragua, as well as Honduras. Caroline was safe, house sitting in an elevated area of the island. Roatan was under a tsunami watch at the time. The watch was later cancelled.

2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean

Islands can be in extreme danger after earthquakes originate in the ocean. The wave that begins as little more than a ripple gains height and strength as it travels. The end result may be a wall of water such as the December 26, 2004 9.3 tsunami that caused such widely spread death and destruction in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and India after a 9.3 magnitude earthquake. It released energy equivalent to 23,000 Hiroshima-type atomic bombs according to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).

The 2004 tsunami traveled 3,000 miles to Africa, and arrived with sufficient force to kill people and destroy property. A tsunami may be less than a foot in height on the surface of the open ocean, but it travels through the ocean at hundreds of miles per hour. Once it reaches shallow water near the coast it is slowed down. Since the top of the wave moves faster than the bottom, the sea rises dramatically. This tsunami caused waves as high as 50 feet in some places. It destroyed thousands of miles of coastline and even permanently submerged entire islands.

At the end of that day, millions of people were struggling with the reality of tens of thousands of dead or missing relatives, destroyed homes, and shattered lives. Thousands of corpses started to rot in the tropical heat. Since there was no food or clean water and many people with open wounds, the risk of famine and epidemic diseases was high. Health authorities feared the death toll might reach 300,000. The U.S. Geological Survey initially recorded the death toll as 283,100 killed, 14,100 missing, and 1,126,900 people displaced. However, analysis compiled by the United Nations listed a total of 229,866 people lost, including 186,983 dead and 42,883 missing. In 1964, on Good Friday, a 9.2 earthquake and tsunami hit Prince William Sound, Alaska. Not many lives were lost in that one. However, on July 27, 1976 a 7.5

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magnitude earthquake in Tangshan, China resulted in an official death count of 255,000 with estimated death counts as high as 655,000. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) through the center for tsunami research now monitors two tsunami warning systems in the Pacific Ocean; the West Coast/Alaska Tsunami Warning Center and the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center. Unfortunately no warnings were given after the earthquake that initiated the 2004 tsunami.

First reactions

My first reaction to Caroline's situation was, "Thank goodness she's on high ground." Caroline had been able to contact her roommate at an elevation and learned that people were pouring out onto the streets. Great, as long as they headed to higher elevations, because of the tsunami watch.

What can we do in situations like this?

What could Caroline's mother or aunt (my sister-in-law) do to help Caroline? Well, nothing physically. When a loved one is in the midst of danger, if you are thousands of miles away, you obviously can't physically carry them out of the danger zone or even give them a hug to provide reassurance. Nonetheless, there is a lot you can do emotionally and psychologically.

Emotional and psychological support

Our emotional support for someone in a dangerous situation can go a long way towards keeping them calm and able to function. We can also provide them with a psychological edge. With the speed of today's media we may already have useful information they are unable to get at their location. If power has been disrupted, we may provide some relief by giving them updates on the scope and seriousness of the disaster and possibly some recommendations the local authorities are trying to disperse. It is hard to get accurate details at the epicenter of the disaster.

Sometimes just knowing we are thinking of them, pulling for them and praying for them provides some measure of psychological support. They can draw upon this support to do whatever it is they need to do to survive.

Perhaps we have taught them, modeled for them or nurtured in them a sense of resiliency and self-sufficiency. These are helpful traits in dangerous situations.

So, our loved one is in danger and we are miles away; maybe even thousands of miles away. What can prepare us for this? Quite a lot can, actually - mental rehearsal, having a plan, preparation and practice.

Mental rehearsal

Just as we need to engage in "what ifs" for our own protection, such as, "What if a client threatened me?" or "What if a client hit me?" or what if I'm involved in a traffic accident on the way home?" or "What if a loved one suffers a heart attack and I'm the only one around?" What does mental rehearsal do to prepare us for disasters, whether personal or widespread? By mentally rehearsing what we would do if something happened, we learn our weak spots, realize areas in which we are not fully prepared and can make some decisions about how we should act in certain situations. The military, police, fire and other first responders train with mental rehearsals before practical exercises. It is much safer to have police officers practice in a simulated setting than to initially use live ammunition.

For instance, I know if someone tried to kidnap me in a parking lot, my least chance for survival would be if I was forced into a vehicle and driven away from populated areas.

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I've studied car-jacking kidnap cases and formulated plans of action. Part of my major plans are related to not putting myself into situations where I could become a victim. Remember the "What if a loved one suffers a heart attack and I am the only one around?" Do you know how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)? Can you recognize the signs and symptoms of a heart attack? How about the symptoms of stroke? Would you know what to do if someone was choking? This leads us to the next part of being able to help someone in danger.

Planning

Do you have a plan? Bet you've heard that one before. A good planning brochure utilizing information from several organizations is available at meetings of the Disaster Response Committee or through the American Red Cross. There are guidelines about developing an emergency contact policy for you and your family/loved ones. As mentioned above, there is often an interruption of communication services during/after a disaster. You need to designate a contact person out of the area; for instance, Aunt Mary in Chicago. Everyone involved in the disaster then calls Aunt Mary to let her know they are safe and to leave messages for others. Be sure to choose a secondary contact person in case Aunt Mary is not available. Pick your contact person carefully. If Aunt Mary is 95 years old and hard of hearing, she's not a good choice for the designated contact person. Now that you have a viable plan in place, what's next?

Preparation

Now is the time to start preparations to enact your plan. That just means getting all of the supplies you might need. If you have done some of this preparation with your loved ones, they will also have a sense of how to become prepared. This preparation will be helpful if they find themselves in a critical incident. We will discuss how to determine what is necessary for you and your loved ones at a later time. The important thing is to remember that a great list won't help much unless you have also gathered the items on your list. Later is too late in a disaster! How can you practice the plan?

Practice

Are you young enough to remember all the hours we accumulated towards getting our license? I may not be young enough but I still have some vivid memories of all the places I worked to get the hours. That was practicing under supervision. I had some wonderful supervisors and really enjoyed many aspects of the process. The manner in which we practice anything whether it is driving or running a marathon is often the way in which we perform the task at a later time. Disaster response is the same. In addition to learning about disasters, engaging in mental rehearsals, planning and preparation, we still need to practice in disaster drills.

That is why some drills are mandated by law, such as fire drills in schools. I have talked to many clients in high rises that say they have never had a drill at their location. That may or may not be true. They may have missed a drill. If I worked in a high rise (above one story), I would want to know what the disaster plans were, are exits posted, necessary doors kept unlocked for escape from the inside and probably several hundred additional questions. The same goes for one story buildings.)

We can do a lot to assist our loved ones when they are in the midst of danger. Perhaps the best thing we can do for our loved ones is acquire training in several areas related to disaster response. Then show by example that we are as ready as we can be for the disasters we are most likely to experience in our area. As it turned out, Caroline, my

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sister-in-law's niece was safe. Although there was a death toll of 6 persons, there was not the wide-spread damage and death tolls that have occurred with other 7.1 magnitude earthquakes.

About the author

ROBERTA S. FLYNN, Psy.D. is a Director, trainer and product development specialist for Professional Workplace Interaction, Inc. She has 30 years of experience as a speaker, teacher, and instructor in government, school, hospital, industrial, and law enforcement settings. Her training seminar topics include professional interaction, conflict resolution, cultural diversity, stress management, ethics, and workplace and school violence.

She also specializes in Threat Assessment, Expert Witness testimony, Violence Assessments, and Disaster Preparedness/Response/Recovery issues. She has trained response teams for organizations in the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and led table-top and other exercises to produce more effective preparation and response protocols.

Dr. Flynn is a retired San Diego Police Sergeant, with 15 years of law enforcement experience; responding to critical incidents and disasters. She is an expert in working with special populations such as mentally and physically challenged individuals, psychiatric clients, the homeless, the elderly and veterans. Her expertise includes workers' compensation issues, workplace ergonomics, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and counseling industrially injured workers. She is knowledgeable about vicarious liability, negligent retention and sexual harassment; issues that seriously impact both employers and employees.