

The Earthquake Disaster in Haiti

TWO YEARS & 4 MONTHS LATER

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WHAT'S A DISASTER ?

- In 1992, the U.N. defined disaster as “a serious disruption of a society, causing widespread human, material, and environmental losses, which exceed the capacity of the affected society to cope, using only its own resources”.

A HAITIAN DISASTER ?

- Haiti has dealt with disasters for centuries. They have been man-made or natural
- From slavery to the war of independence(1804)
- Isolation from the rest of the world
- Dictatorships and “coup d’etats”
- Boat people, HIV carriers ???
- Civil wars, gang violence (kidnappings)
- Hurricanes and floods
- The January 12, 2010 earthquake
- Then..., cholera epidemic

The Earthquake Human Toll

According to the UN, in a New York Times report dated February 15, 2010

- Killed : 217,366
- Wounded : 300,572
- Missing : 383
- In spontaneous settlements : 1,237,032
- Displaced outside Port-au-Prince :
511,405






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How did Haitians react ?

- Resilience, resignation, grief
- Was this about faith, voodoo, destiny ?
- Scientific and conspiracy theories ?
- Anxiety, depression
- Alcohol and psychosis
- Complications of preexisting psychiatric problems

In the Diaspora ?

- Guilt, helplessness
- Anger, worries
- Psychosomatic symptoms
- Grief, depression, anxiety
- Suicidal ideation and behavior
- Substance abuse
- Worsening of existing problems

Crisis Situation

- Crisis is a perception or experiencing of an event or situation as an intolerable difficulty that exceeds the person's current resources and coping mechanisms.
- Crisis here is an “individual disaster”
- 3 types of individual crisis, according to Brammer : developmental, situational, existential
- The earthquake created an ecosystemic crisis in Haiti

The earthquake: ecosystemic crisis

All 5 of Bronfenbrenner's ecological components of the Haitian society have been affected by the earthquake:

- 1- Microsystem: the individual's immediate environment is destroyed (home, church), close people dead, missing
- 2- Mesosystem: communications collapsed (telephones are down; total black out)
- 3- Exosystem: already inadequate infrastructure seriously damaged (transportation out, access to basic needs impossible, schools, banks, out of order)
- 4- Macrosystem: government is paralyzed; the national psyche is shaken up
- 5- Chronosystem: the time factor. How does it affect the crisis ?

Chronosystemic perspective

- TIME has been a critical variable in post-earthquake Haiti:
- 1- Impact: (first hours and days), fear, shock, denial, self-protection, food and shelter, communication, inventory, loved ones, job place
- 2- Honeymoon phase: (first quarter), “we are in this together” attitude, optimism, media coverage, political attention, financial support, hope for rebuilding
- 3- Adaptation vs Disillusionment: (first year), recovery or victim of “second disaster”
- 4- 2nd, 3rd year : rebuilding, stabilization or PTSD ?

Mental Health Interventions

- Haitian Mental Health Summit : June 26, 27, 2010, at the University of Miami
- APA (BPS, IPS) – NYU/Global Mental Health – SUNY Downstate – HAPA (Haitian American Psychiatric Association) – World Psychiatric Congress
- BPA and Association of Black Psychologists
- Haitian Ministry of Health and Mental Health Practitioners in Haiti
- Partners in Health / Zanmi LaSante
- Mars & Kline, and Pont Beudet Hospitals



Rebati Sante Mentale

- Helping develop a mental health infrastructure with hospitals serving as hubs
- Training teachers as therapists (TAT)
- Primary care physicians and nurse practitioners to be trained in basic psychopharmacology
- Building community based primary care networks
- Mobilization of Haitian professionals in Haiti and in diaspora to pursue above goals
- Coordination, monitoring, research, mapping, supporting, funding
- Haitian Ministry of Health representative is co-chair of Rebati board of directors

What about the international volunteers and relief workers?

- “When someone has lost everything, asking them how they are doing is futile”.
- Food, water, clothing, basic needs...
- The deceased, the injured, the children, the handicapped, the elderly...
- Then looting, rapes, total loss of privacy, amputations, infections, more deaths...
- How, where do you sleep, rest, wash up, eat; are you scared, stressed, and burned out
- “Crisis work is more about perspiration than inspiration”
- After the initial rush of enthusiasm, zeal, and unbridled energy, there is a lot of sweat, tears, and agony

Some do's for disaster relief workers

- Work in teams
- Take time off to sleep and decompress
- Have plenty of water and food
- Clear chain of command with clear role and function statements
- Different teams debrief each other
- Debriefing is held away from the crisis scene
- Be in good physical and mental health
- Help without interfering or making assumptions

What have we learned ?

- In a poor country like Haiti, social pathology, inadequate infrastructure, physical & mental health problems, all will invite cycles of disaster with intertwined human and natural causes
- International effort must understand the different culture, a special history, politics, language, and religion
- The Haitian survivor must be allowed to process feelings in line with his/her religious interpretation of events, without any judgment being passed on the merit of those beliefs
- 9/11, Katrina, Tsunami, Oklahoma, Columbine, Tokyo, Madrid, Haiti, Israel, Australia, South Africa, Sudan, Japan, all these “disasters” tell us that large-scale crisis and chaos will keep happening ...(role of the NGO’s).

The future of Mental Health in Haiti

- The Haitian Government, with the help of NGO's and "Rebati Sante Mentale", must develop a long term national mental health policy
- The earthquake has offered one opportunity : we will not think only about responses to crisis. "Systems, sustainability, and strategy" must become the focus, as per G. Belkin
- History, culture, and language demand that only the leadership and long term commitment of Haitian born professionals will insure the rebuilding (rebati) of a mental health infrastructure in the country.

References

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