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Resilience in the Face of Devastation: A Chat with Disaster Responder and Denver Faculty Member Karen Stewart

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At home and abroad, natural disasters have devastated communities, reducing buildings to rubble, forcing people to flee their homes and leaving behind emotional scars from the overwhelming trauma of loss. Despite this devastation, survivors continue to rebuild with the help of humanitarian aid and disaster relief responders including many in the social work field.

Karen Stewart, an adjunct faculty member with the Graduate School of Social Work External link at the University of Denver, has worked in humanitarian aid serving as a Mental Health Officer and Coach for Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and has responded to a number of crises including the 2005 tsunami in Banda Aceh and the 2006 earthquake in Java. Social workers, she says, play an important role in helping to reestablish communities and reconnect families to their environments, but she also cautions them to take time for self-care in overwhelming situations. To shed light on the challenges of responding to natural disasters, we sat down with Stewart who discussed her experiences in emergency response and the potential effects of the increased frequency of disasters.

As a responder to a natural disaster, what is it like to see first-hand the devastation that people experience?

To see the devastation on such a scale that I have never seen before was heartbreaking. You looked around and realized that in the tsunami that affected that many people, everyone lost someone. When I got there in 2005, people were still searching for family members. They were still holding out hope.

In all of my work, I am so appreciative of people's resilience and the hope that they manage to hang on to and the courage that they display. Sometimes you think, "How can you see so much devastation and still hold out hope?" But many parents are thinking "I have lost children, but I still have two other children right here."

As a responder to a natural disaster, what is it like to see first-hand the devastation that people experience?

As a general rule, it seems people in many countries that I have worked in live in survival mode. They don't concern themselves with what has happened. They cope and deal with what's in front of them.

When you have lost everything — your property, your land, your livestock, your ID papers — replacing those simple things in this country is not a problem. It isn't so easy in many other countries.

But the biggest need that I see immediately is family tracing. Anytime people are forced from their home on the run, they have to leave people. That's a huge piece that needs to be addressed. How are these families going to reestablish themselves? That can be very difficult, especially if they are settling in an area that doesn't want them. That tends to happen with disasters.

How did you and your social work colleagues set out to help communities on the ground?

What we are doing is trying to help people really with whatever is going on with them — trying to help normalize their lives. For example, people who have experienced an earthquake may be scared of reentering a building and start to think, “I'm going crazy.” But it's perfectly normal that you don't want to go inside. We are going to work really hard to help people identify those reactions or consequences of their experiences to get them back to their daily functioning.

How can we help them get back to what they normally do? By reconnecting them to their environments — not doing recovery in a vacuum. We want them to reconnect with their family and reestablish meeting areas. The quicker we can get all of that in place, the quicker people are going to bounce back. And with psychological first aid, we want to teach the local people how to service their own communities, so that we can have a strong team and reach more people.

What kind of toll does working in a disaster setting take on social workers and other responders?

The reality is that you are going there to work and you can end up working six days a week. In an extreme emergency, you might be living and working in a house right above the office and you're putting in 10- to 12-hour days. And when you are not working, you are still thinking about it. The situation can be very extreme and it's important to put up some buffers for yourself. I would shut down pretty early at night. Chances are that you'll have a small area that's yours, and you just have to shut down and have some alone time. Take time away and step out of the emergency when and if you can, otherwise it can really swallow you up.

What are some of the biggest challenges in disaster response?

When I look at the tsunami, it really was a lesson in what not to do. There was so much money coming in and so many NGOs and it was such a big response that it was not able to be managed. In some cases, the people handling recovery didn't even have expertise in the field. Mismanagement can happen. Even with Hurricane Harvey, we saw truckloads of diapers come in with nowhere to put them. These kinds of things add to the problem. When you have droves of people that come to help, that's a hundred more people that you have to figure out what to do with.

When people arrive, they forget to check with the people on the ground. There are local agencies and local community organizations who know what people need. Those are the people to contact. Don't just pop in. Hook up with an agency.

Looking to the future, do you have any concerns about how natural disasters may impact communities across the globe?

The planet is off of her axis a bit and we are going to continue to see extreme disasters External link . It freaks me out entirely because people are moving toward urban settings. There is the pull to go to these big massive cities, and when one of those gets hit, we are going to see a disaster on a whole different scale.

We have to find better, more efficient ways to get people to safety. With so many of our disasters, we already know that they are coming. We can pretty much tell that something is going to happen and I think our mistake is that we don't plan ahead. We knew that the levies weren't good. There's a lot that we can do preventatively. These disasters don't need to be as devastating if we are ahead of the game.