

The Ties that Bind Us: Fostering Connection and Resiliency after a Disaster

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Introduction

- Honored to be here today with so many people whose work I have been inspired by over the past five years.
- You have redefined how a people can respond to the psychosocial needs generated by a disaster in ways that have offered leadership to those of us who work in this field around the world.

Before Wenchuan

- The field of disaster response was dominated by Westerners, who applied a "one-size fits all approach," guided by Western psychology, to all nations and cultures in the World.
- This approach I will call "**Disaster Mental Health**", where there were many assumptions that I believe were culturally arrogant and in many instances wrong.

The problem with a Western approach

- Focuses on the psychological often at the expense of the social.
- Relies on trained professionals to provide counseling and therapy.
- Tends to focus on the psychiatric pathology that results from disasters.
- Not culturally sensitive or responsive.
- Focus is more on individuals than on family, group and community

We know how disasters affect individuals

- Physically
- Cognitively
- Emotionally
- Behaviorally
- Interpersonally
- Meaning-making

And all of you here today know....

- That disasters affect families - as members are lost or injured, routines are disrupted, roles are lost or reversed and the pressures on the family as a unit increase.
- And that disasters affects communities – destroying infrastructure, tearing social networks apart, weakening cultural connections and ties, and taking away a collective vision of a hopeful future

Grief when there is a Disaster

- Sudden – no preparation
- Untimely deaths
- Many deaths
- Can be violent deaths or deaths with suffering
- “Ambiguous Loss”
- Survivors may still be in an unsafe and unstable situation.
- Survivors may not be able to practice their cultural beliefs which can inhibit grieving and mourning.


Psychosocial Capacity Building

- Strength and resiliency based.
- Cannot separate psychological well-being from social well-being.
- Takes an ecological view of both the impact of the disaster and the response to it..
- People will heal with their own resources if given support.
- Local affected people are co-partners.

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Seven Critical Tasks

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- Establish a sense of safety
 - Help people to be able to calm themselves.
 - Help people to feel a sense of empowerment.
 - Help connect people with other people and resources – which is why groups can help.
 - Re-establish a sense of place and routine.
 - Allow time and space for grieving and mourning
 - Help the community to reconstruct a sense of hope.

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Fostering Resiliency?

- Working collaboratively with local people
- Supporting the efforts of those affected to help themselves and others
- Helping people to grieve and mourn individually and collectively despite the barriers.
- Teaching self-calming techniques
- Helping people to access and foster positive emotions

Resiliency (cont.)

- Enabling social connections between individuals, families and social groups and promoting mutual aid and social support – use groups
- Helping people to tell their stories
- Helping individuals, families and communities to reconnect with their traditional cultural sources of strength and meaning

Different Types of Groups Used after the Earthquake

- Informational and Psycho-education Groups
- Counseling Groups
- Activity or skill-building Groups
- Recreational Groups
- Mutual Aid and Support Groups

The Social Qi of Groups

- They offer social connection and social support.
- They are empowering.
- They help to construct a collective narrative that encompasses many individuals.
- More people bring more resources and more ideas to the table.
- They can be enjoyable and foster positive emotions.
- They help to reconnect people to their sense of community and their relationship to their culture- they generate meaning.

Some lessons learned from Five years ago

- The Chinese government and NGOs did a great job of rescuing people and rehousing people – particularly with the hardware. Out of a terrible tragedy came a heroic response. There is much to be proud of.
- China – both NGOs, academics and government – recognized that a Western approach to disasters did not fit with Chinese culture.
- Which contributed to too much emphasis on trauma, too little emphasis on social connections and collective rebuilding, too little understanding of Chinese culture.
Although some people have mental health issues, all people have psychosocial needs.

What worked well

- The collaborations between universities, NGO's and government. .
- The social work stations that were set up that had people on-site.
- Offering bereavement counseling for those who wanted it.
- Serving as mediators when there was conflict between survivors and the government.
- Organizing groups, such as groups for mothers who lost their children or groups that helped women to earn money through embroidery.

Three Examples of Painful lessons that you Shared with me

- There was tremendous pressure on cadres and other local government workers –especially when they have also been directly affected. They need help, support and an emphasis on self-care.
- People were not always rehoused near their neighbors which caused secondary stress and took away an important source of support. Reconstruct community!
- Citizens who have grievances and remain angry take longer to heal and move on with their lives.

Some Recommendations

- Support local people as co-participants in planning as much as possible.
- Build their ability to help themselves and others using capacity building approaches.
- Groups are the modality of choice!
- Be sensitive to rebuilding and maintaining cultural practices in a post-disaster environment.

Recommendations (Continued)

- People need time to grieve and mourn their losses and help to do this creatively.
- It is essential to offer hope for the future, which is based on a sense of justice, fairness, social trust and closure.
- Those who are helpers – e.g. cadres, NGO workers – need lessons and support in self-care.
- Coordination between responders is essential

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The Ties that Bind Us

- After any kind of tragedy and disaster, whatever culture we are from, the most basic thing we need is the care and company of other people, who empathically understand us and respect and support us
- The people in this room, and thousands of other Chinese responders to the Wenchuan earthquake understood this and used this fundamental understanding to guide their work.

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Conclusion

- China is a world leader in many areas and the lessons learned from the Wenchuan earthquake offer a foundation to provide world leadership in the field of psychosocial capacity building.
- We can always do better, and I know that today we will hear about ideas to improve how we respond.
- But I hope that all of you can pause for a moment and applaud yourself for not only the pioneering work that you did for your people but the inspiration and modeling that you offered to people like me and others around the world.

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