

## **HELPING VOLUNTEERS: TRAUMA AND DISASTER**

### **Making Sense of Unexpected Responses From Those You are Trying to Help**

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When volunteers are unprepared for what they may encounter they become far more vulnerable to a wide range of unwanted reactions.

- Victims don't always "thank-you" or may not be able to say "thank-you" while in shock even weeks later.
- Victims are not always able to help other victims even though it appears they are capable of doing so. When one is in the most intense survival mode, their systems may become rigid and unable to reach out to others.
- If you have ever been to a Senior Fair you know to step back. Some seniors will have no boundaries, step in front of you; make a direct line to whatever table or booth is giving free handouts. They just grab everything in sight. It is not about what they can or cannot use. Hoarding is a way of hanging onto the last remnant of life. This is the behavior of people who have lost a great deal and are terrified of being abandoned and alone in death.
- In crisis victims do and say things they would not normally say or do.
- In the state of trauma or terror, which can be defined as feeling totally powerless and unsafe, victims may become more aggressive, even assaultive. This can be a basic survival response to what or who is perceived to be a threat to their life.
- In large-scale disasters, victims will include every day normal functioning individuals, whose responses no longer look normal.
- In large-scale disasters, victims will include those who have been homeless for sometime and who may return to shelters in the evening intoxicated and/or exhibit varied psychiatric conditions.
- In a large-scale disaster, victims will also include the psychiatric population who may not have had their medication for days and are beginning to deteriorate.
- Victims can bring much personal history to shelters that is activated when under extreme stress.
- Behaviors, influenced by culture, can certainly be misleading to those unfamiliar with those cultural practices of victims.

It is important for volunteers to remain non-judgmental. However, this can be difficult when not adequately prepared for the wide range of responses that can be experienced as shocking, ungrateful and even intimidating.

Unprepared and untrained volunteers can be idealistic in their expectations as to how they will be appreciated. When victims don't show their gratitude for water, when they say things like "Don't you have any pizza?" as a whole array of other food choices are presented to them; when they laugh at volunteers' questions or requests for help; those idealistic expectations can quickly shatter. It may leave volunteers themselves in shock,

disillusioned, even angry and in some cases, precipitate that volunteer's own history with trauma.

Most volunteers expect organizers to be organized. In reality, disaster relief is often initially not about "day to day" but "hour to hour". Hurricane Katrina, certainly by its magnitude, revealed difficulties with systematic organizations overall, even from shelter to shelter. Volunteers put into situations where there is confusion, constant changes, and many unknowns, can experience intense anxiety as well as frustration. They can sometimes feel like victims themselves – somewhat helpless, powerless to do what they believe they ought to be doing or could be doing if coordinators had their "act" together. Unprepared volunteers are more vulnerable to vicarious traumatization themselves not just because of what they may be exposed to in devastated areas but also because of what they are also exposed to by the system response.

The sheer number of displaced Katrina evacuees required the Red Cross to eliminate many of its requirements for volunteers, including training, so these volunteers were less prepared. Churches have provided thousands of homes for families, yet many of the volunteer families offering their homes were not prepared for the mental health issues evacuees brought with them.

In the months that follow I hope we do not forget to spend time with volunteers whose expectations were shattered, whose own histories were activated by what they faced, who try to understand why victims responded the way they did, who may be questioning whether they want to be available the next time. And, I do hope that organizers better appreciate the need to educate volunteers as to the differences between grief and trauma, the changes people undergo when in crisis, and the wide range of behaviors and reactions they can expect from victims as well as themselves.

Please feel free to download any of the information on our website regarding trauma that may be helpful to volunteers ([www.tlcinstitute.org](http://www.tlcinstitute.org)).

Please call us (toll-free 1-[877] 306-5256) should you have questions or would like us to present to your group. Hopefully this brief article alone will be helpful.