

Cultural, Ethical, and Spiritual Implications of Natural Disasters from the Survivors' Perspective

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KEYWORDS

• Survivor • Disaster • Tsunami • Relief

A disaster is defined as an unforeseen event that causes great damage, destruction, and human suffering, which in turn overwhelms the response capacity of local communities, oftentimes necessitating external requests for assistance on a national or international level.¹ These sudden calamitous events that bring about great damage, loss, or destruction can be classified into 2 broad categories: natural disasters and human-made disasters.² It seems clear that since the beginning of time, human lives have been disrupted by disasters. It is equally clear that despite the frequently heroic attempts to mitigate the impact of a catastrophic event on a community, a country, or a nation, the effect of a natural disaster has untold consequences for the environment and society.

Advances in technology allow instantaneous communication of the effects of a natural or human-made catastrophe, which has brought increased awareness of the frequency and the profound destruction that may accompany such occurrences. Natural disasters within recent memory include the Indian Ocean tsunami, the Pakistani earthquake, the Kobe earthquake, and Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Ike. Within the past year, earthquakes in Haiti and Chile and floods in Pakistan have added to worldwide devastation caused by naturally occurring events. Recent human-made disasters include the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Gulf oil spill, and the mining accident in Chile.

Annually, millions of people around the world are affected by disasters, and disaster survivors are faced with wide-ranging, often life-threatening dangers, which include large numbers of fatalities; severe injuries; and loss of loved ones, property,

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possessions, neighborhoods, and communities. Adding to the distress of these insults are the effects of the loss of communication with family; fatigue and sleep deprivation; hunger; and emotional or physical strain. Natural disasters may obliterate entire villages or even cities in which survivors have lived since birth. Regardless of the nature of the disaster, human lives are negatively affected and profound societal changes may result. Many investigators have explored the nature of, reasons for, and management of disasters; however, there exists a paucity of literature that details disaster from the victims' perspective. Therefore, this article focuses on the cultural, ethical, and spiritual implications of natural disasters from the survivors' perspective.

CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF DISASTER

Culture is used to describe beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, ceremonies, and informal practices such as language, food, and routines of daily life.³ Culture can be perceived as behavioral responses that have been developed and influenced by social, religious, and intellectual manifestations.⁴ Alterations to the social structure of a society can result in disturbances to societal beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies. Culture can be defined in numerous ways, such as ethnic origin, religion, and language. Certain regional areas might share a common culture of their own regardless of their ethnic or religious background. Irrespective of a disaster's causes, a disaster seriously disrupts the life and social structure of individuals, groups, and communities, and may affect the cultural development of the affected region.

Physical health risks and injuries sustained as a result of a disaster are generally similar across cultures, although some variance is seen depending on the severity of the disaster and the availability of timely relief aid. Nonetheless, psychological responses to disaster, loss, and surrounding stressors tend to be slightly different among cultures. Overall, posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety seem to be the most common reactions to severe crises and disasters; however, manifestations of psychological distress can vary among cultures.^{5,6}

The impact of a disaster on a society is closely related to disaster preparedness, and people prepare, respond, and recover from a disaster within the context of their own culture. Certain cultural groups often do not, or because of the lack of technology and/or communication are unable to, heed warnings about impending disasters. As a result, these groups are inadequately prepared for disaster situations. Developed countries tend to prepare for disasters more thoroughly and further in advance in comparison to developing countries, therefore mitigating some of the resultant devastation.

In some cultures, expressions of trauma are forbidden or strongly discouraged. Various cultures may be more emotionally expressive, whereas others may attempt to carry on as if nothing has happened. Some groups may not need to or may be unwilling to accept assistance from outside parties. An example of this is illustrated in the diametrically opposed response to disaster relief following the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile. The preparedness of the infrastructure as well as economic stability allowed Chileans to handle their disaster response almost entirely within the country, whereas the situation in the impoverished country of Haiti overwhelmed internal resources and necessitated a worldwide response.

Values and Beliefs

According to transcultural nursing theory, the value and belief components of culture influence decision making and actions within the culture. Every community has its own support system and unique manner to deal with crisis situations.⁷ Generally, local relief

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