

Complicated Realities

Mental Health and Moral Incongruence in Disaster/Humanitarian Response



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KEYWORDS

• Moral incongruence • Psychological stress • Ethics • Humanitarian • Disaster

KEY POINTS

- Moral complexity, an inherent characteristic within disaster/humanitarian settings, has an impact on responder mental health.
- An individual serving as a disaster ethicist has the potential to make a valuable contribution to moral decision-making and potentially decrease responders' psychological burden.
- Providing care within differing cultural settings creates additional uncertainty when weighing right or wrong responses to morally complex questions.

INTRODUCTION

The setting is austere, and victims arrive in greater numbers as search and rescue efforts intensify. The number of patients is overwhelming. Exhausted due to inability to sleep, extended 14-hour to 16-hour workdays, and hot temperatures, decisions allocating and rationing limited resources are made reflexively. Time and energy to rationalize and reflect on thought processes is scarce. In the quiet moments, my decisions return to haunt me, and I struggle with my decisions in angst.

The scenario is derived from the experiences of one who worked diligently to restore a modicum of stability to Haitian residents after the January 12, 2010, earthquake.¹ Although this scenario is reflective of one responder's dilemma, stories of moral distress among disaster/humanitarian responders are common.

Morality is inherently intertwined into the organization of social practices.² Exploration of press releases, research, blog entries, and other documentation of disaster/humanitarian events reveal that morality and ethics are also woven into the social contract between responders and survivors. In fact, the International Red Cross Code of

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Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in disaster relief (**Box 1**) asserts that the motivation of disaster response is to relieve human suffering in a manner that is neither partisan nor politically or religiously motivated. Likewise, responders are to strive to assuage human suffering in recognition that life is to be valued without consideration to geographic boundaries.³

Due to the nature of disaster/humanitarian work, the extent to which disaster/humanitarian responders can and do apply basic ethical principles (**Box 2**)⁴⁻⁶ to moral decision-making processes is not known.^{7,8} In the course of disaster/humanitarian response, providers are exposed to chaotic environments riddled with morally complex situations. Humanitarian work has been described as a morally complex activity characterized by family and friends who are geographically distant, extended work hours, ethically charged dilemmas, rapid change, and volatility mixed with intervals of tedium and routine. Consequently, responders immersed in the milieu may perform activities that result in unintended harm.⁹

In disaster settings, psychological trauma may be exacerbated by visual cues while working among the dead or grossly injured, risk of personal injury, extended work hours, individual and group suffering, moral distress as a result of alterations to normal practice in the provision of care, and extended chaos.⁹⁻¹¹ Moreover, forces within the responder's organization or response team have the power to push values that normally affect personal behavior into the background.¹² For these reasons, disaster/humanitarian responders, who are immersed in efforts to mitigate poverty, suffering, and death, are often confronted with morally complex situations.

Moral incongruence may occur as responders, accustomed to providing individualized care, reorient their thinking to provide population-based care in the face of insufficient supplies, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of trained personnel.^{6,8} Resource allocation in austere settings is a factor in moral compromise among

Box 1

Code of conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and nongovernmental organizations in disaster relief

1. The humanitarian imperative comes first.
2. Aid is given regardless of race, creed, or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone.
3. Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint.
4. We shall endeavor not to act as instruments of governmental foreign policy.
5. We shall respect culture and custom.
6. We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capabilities.
7. Ways shall be found to involve program beneficiaries in the management of relief aid.
8. Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meeting basic needs.
9. We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources.
10. In our information, publicity, and advertising activities, we shall recognize disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects.

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