

# Psychologists working with trauma: a humanistic approach

**A** woman who was trapped alone in her bathtub the night of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake reported: "I walked out...without my purse. I figured I'd go to the hospital where I used to work....I needed to be able to keep myself busy and give them a hand." Asked where her strength came from, she replied: "I trust in the Lord that everything will be all right....If it's your turn to go, it's your turn to go....We just live the best we can each day."

This woman responded to the crisis with courage and a sense of meaning. But others cannot mobilize themselves during crises, and become victims. What makes one person a survivor and another a victim?

Humanistic psychology tells us that one difference is the ability to make meaning from events, and in the stories that create this meaning. For example, the woman above told herself to "Trust in the Lord," to "live the best...each day," and not to waste her life.

Another difference between survivors and victims is that some people have witnesses to their lives, significant others to whom they can tell their stories. The presence of a sympathetic listener encourages memory, facilitates the discovery of meaningful patterns and opens the way to acceptance and re-integration.

## Lessons from disaster

During the Loma Prieta earthquake, I worked in the shelters with elderly San Francisco residents and used narrative as a method to help their recovery. Narrative proved to be a useful clinical intervention—a way of dealing with the sense of loss of meaning, of recovering a sense of worth and self-esteem and as a guide for the recovery of faith.

We asked participants what they feared, how they coped and what they valued. In their answers, several themes emerged that helped transform disaster into meaning: work, courage, independence, relationships, family and a spiritual dimension to life. By reflecting on



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these themes, survivors clarified their priorities and made changes in their lives.

What can these themes teach us about living today?

- The ability to face mortality can lead to creativity and boldness in the face of death, and is the most potent way to deal with fear.

- The dramatic interruption caused by a disaster can be a unique window of opportunity for psychologists not only to help their clients back toward normalcy, but to explore the open window. Some people use a life-changing experience to reassess their lives, priorities and values; what is the difference between those who can do that and those who cannot?

- Trauma involves the whole person. Trauma and anxiety live especially in muscle memories. Humanistic psychologists use experiential methods such as relaxation and imagery to evoke and release these painful memories. Recent mind/body studies have demonstrated the role of neuropeptide receptors in the brain in emotional processing; the depth of trauma in natural and man-made disasters calls for mind/body approaches to be included in the therapeutic response.

- What is normalcy? Humanistic

psychologists have always valued the uniqueness of each human being, and know that reality is neither simple nor monolithic. Narrative, constructivist and postmodern psychologists have extended the idea of multiple realities to the idea of multiple selves. The new global order suggests that old realities are breaking down at dizzying speed. It would seem that optimal resiliency, therefore, calls for skills in improvisation, spontaneity and fluidity. It would be helpful if psychologists were prepared to recognize the multiple ways survivors grieve, and reconstruct their realities and themselves.

- As humans, we face constant uncertainty. Rather than flee this reality and try to control the uncertainty, we can practice living with uncertainty. Some traditions, such as Tibetan Buddhism, teach actual useful practices that do this, and the introduction of Eastern perspectives can broaden traditional Western approaches.

## Preparing for the future

In 1975, Rollo May commented on the coming of a new age of anxiety: "We are called upon to do something new, to confront a no man's land, to push into a forest where there are no well-worn paths and from which no one has returned to guide us. This is what the existentialists have called the anxiety of nothingness. To live in the future means to leap into the unknown, and this requires a degree of courage for which there is no immediate precedent and few people realize" ("The Courage to Create").

Finding ways to live with the new set of uncertainties is the challenge of being human in this millennium. Building on such humanistic approaches as facing mortality, discovering the courage to be, learning resilience and optimism, and transforming information to wisdom is one such way. Ψ

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