



Encyclopedia of Trauma: An Interdisciplinary Guide

Psychospiritual Impact of Disaster

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Disasters affect communities and individuals in many ways. The most apparent of these is the ecological and environmental, but wherever people are affected, there will be psychological and spiritual impacts that may continue long after the restoration of the physical environment. The term psychospiritual is used in this context to describe the holistic psychological and spiritual state or perspective of a person or community of people.

Since the earliest times, disaster and spiritual influence have been understood as standing together. The English word disaster originates from the Greek pejorative prefix *dus-* and *aster* (star), thus literally meaning “bad-starred.” This comes from an ancient astrological understanding that disasters are caused by events beyond the control of mortals and are shown as ill omens in the heavens. Ancient literature contains explanations for natural disasters being caused by the displeasure of divine beings. Even today, it is common to describe a disastrous weather event as “an act of God.”

The impact of a disaster may well go beyond the psychological or physiological to challenge a person's predisaster concepts of meaning, moral purpose, and faith in divine providence.

The issue of theodicy emerges in these circumstances. The word theodicy comes from the Greek words *theo* (god) and *diké* (justice) and raises the theological problem of understanding the nature of God in times of hardship and evil. How can God be good, all-powerful, and yet allow evil or harm? Disaster-affected people may thus have their world-views and frameworks of faith tested as they search for meaning in the midst of disaster.

Natural versus Human-Made Disasters

Disasters are broadly characterized by being either natural—for example, floods or earthquakes—or human-made, such as shootings or transport accidents. Between these come natural disasters such as wildfires that may have been contributed to by people. The psychospiritual impact of each of these categories raises different issues:

Natural Disasters

Natural disasters raise the theodicean question of God's character and the divine's relationship with, and regard for, humanity. Natural disasters also create an acute awareness of how little control humanity has over its environment and our vulnerability to the forces of nature ordinarily taken for granted. This awareness can promote a sense of helplessness, blaming God, or turning to God for help, safety, or recovery.

Human-Made Disasters

Human-made disasters cause us to recognize our vulnerability to the actions of other people. They also challenge us to personally consider our own nature in the light of those who have caused these disasters.

There are two further subcategories of human-made disasters: accidental and malevolent. Accidental disasters, such as transport accidents, highlight our capacity to make mistakes. Their psychospiritual impact is to raise the awareness that we are imperfect and vulnerable to the outcomes of others' imperfect actions.

Malevolent disasters are purposely created by people. These may include events such as terrorist attacks or shootings. These highlight humanity's capacity for malice, harm, or—in a spiritual sense—evil.

Two common responses to self-alignment with the reality of human fault and evil are, first, avoidance—through apportioning blame or stereotyping other individuals or groups as “evil.” This avoids facing issues of corporate guilt or fault, which include the person making the judgment. A second response is identification—through public acts of solidarity or religious rites of confession—in which people confess their fault and imperfection before a higher power in prayer.

Psychospiritual Impact and Response

Impact on Faith

The psychospiritual impact on the faith of individuals will be as diverse as the individuals themselves but falls into three basic responses:

- 1.
Some individuals lose their faith in a benevolent God who could allow such tragedy. This may happen particularly where the death and suffering of loved ones are concerned.
- 2.
Some maintain their faith, trusting in God's providence regardless of the circumstances, finding solace in this faith.
- 3.
Others come to a new faith having survived or experienced some positive outcome despite exposure to tragedy. In these cases, the failure of natural or social environment is counterbalanced by hope in a higher power or unseen future, particularly beyond death.

Spiritual Reframing

Disaster-affected people may reframe an event's meaning within a greater moral or spiritual context in accordance with their psychospiritual worldview. This is apparent when they describe an event as being "God's will," "part of a higher purpose," "karma," "a blessing," or "a judgment."

Guilt

Guilt is a psychospiritual response whereby a person believes that he or she has violated a moral standard or failed through an action connected with moral choice. Postdisaster guilt is an issue for many, particularly for those experiencing "survivors' guilt," or replaying "what-if" or "if-only" scenarios. This can be particularly affecting where the guilt is felt regarding parting words to, or actions toward, someone who died thereafter. Given that forgiveness cannot be extended by the dead, prayer—and an understanding of divine forgiveness—may be an important part of the healing process.

The Place of Prayer

Prayer, individual or corporate, can be an important means of processing the psychospiritual impact of grief or trauma. This may include intercessory prayer (prayer for disaster-affected people), prayers for healing with individuals, or prayers of confession (in relation to guilt). Prayer therapy involves inviting the divine to interact with the client and the therapist.

Communal Response to Disaster

When a community is affected by disaster, members of the community commonly respond with some form of ritual, symbol, or liturgy. Memorial services follow tragic events as a means of processing psychospiritual and communal trauma. Similar to a funeral service, these services allow the recognition or worship of a higher power; publicly naming the trauma and hardship, honoring the victims, supporting their loved ones, facilitating a public grieving, corporate prayer, and publicly seeking divine blessing and healing. This may also continue through annual services at the anniversary of a tragedy.

- disasters
- transport accidents
- gods
- guilt

- community in disaster
- forgiveness
- spirituals

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See Also

- [Disaster-Related Trauma](#)
- [Religious and Pastoral Responses to Trauma](#)

Further Readings

Lewis, C. S. (1940). *The problem of pain*. London, UK: Collins.

Robinson, S. G. (2010). *Ministry in disaster settings: Lessons from the edge*. Sydney, Australia: Atlantis Books.