

Preparedness, Impact, and Coping: Lessons from Hurricane Sandy

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When one helps another

BOTH become stronger

While the media was obsessively warning people about the importance of getting ready for Hurricane Sandy, I observed mixed behaviors around me. This was going to be a category 1 hurricane, a 300-mile-long swath of devastation packing 90 mph winds starting from Virginia and stretching all the way to New England. In the wake of the destruction, Sandy claimed the lives of many in New York and Long Island, destroyed significant properties such as houses and cars, resulted in power outages affecting millions, left debris and devastation galore, and portions of our infrastructure and many businesses are crippled. Recovery will be a slow, arduous process.

Meaningfulworld had scheduled an autumn-foliage hot air balloon ride for Sunday morning, and we rescheduled it to Saturday instead. This was an exercise for fun and to help people with their fear of heights. In spite of all the concerns, fears, and threats of inclement weather, we were able to fly and had a great time. Even then our discussions turned to subjects such as how the youth will be able to cope with no electricity for a week to 10 days. Would they be able to converse, play cards, read a book, or just tell stories around candlelight?? Many have told us that they could not imagine life without the Internet, let alone without electricity.



Examples of destruction in our area, and people waiting on lines for 5-10 hours for gasoline

The Hurricane did strike as strongly as they expected in the South Jersey area. In Northern New Jersey we received a hard hit with high winds, but not as much rain as forecasters expected. We had actually placed empty containers in our garden to collect the rainwater for flushing toilets, but there was only about 2 inches of rain. Mostly we experienced high winds, lots of trees falling, electrical poles down, trash cans flying, as well as the foliage swirling and piling up all around. I am grateful for what we had, as I am not sure we are able to cope with any catastrophes in our area. First, we have no evacuation plan

nor evacuation route; second, we do not conduct any emergency-evacuation drills, and third, we are not ready emotionally, as well as practically.

It was so interesting to observe people's reactions to the preparation phase of the Hurricane. People were in these three categories:

A. Those who obsessively over-bought everything they needed or did not even need – Such as a trunk full of batteries, even for sizes that they had no need of like AAA. They bought groceries and blankets and left the shelves at the supermarket totally bare.

B. Those who did absolutely nothing, reassuring themselves that in fact we had never had a category 1 hurricane, and that it would be a light storm and nothing to worry about. They reasoned along the lines that we had never had a hurricane except the past year's Hurricane Irene, which was not so bad, and we still had electricity in our area.

C. Those who put all their kids in their vehicles and drove away, some to Florida, some to Arkansas, others to the Catskills or wherever they could run away to and still have electricity and daily comfort.



Destruction in my gratitude garden...

Group B then began panicking after Monday night, when in fact the hurricane hit so hard, from Cape May, Sandy Hook, all the way up north to Connecticut, that it flooded coastal areas, ripping electrical posts as well as 100-year-old trees from their roots, killing some people in their own bedroom while they were watching TV, as others were washed out along the shore. Pieces of beach boardwalks were found 10 blocks inland, and hospitals by the Hudson and East Rivers had to be evacuated both in New York and New Jersey. This group embarked on a search spree for a generator, gasoline, batteries, and candles, now paying double prices for all. The lines for to buy generators comprised more than 100 people; they were punctuated by fights erupting here and there, and the waiting list was up to 500 people in the Home Depot in Paramus. In other stores they promised that they would have generators, asked for pre-payment, and told buyers to return the next morning at 5 A.M. after waiting on the queue for over four hours. The next morning they walk up at 5 A.M. and wait on long lines again, only to be told to return in the afternoon, and in the afternoon they were told the truck was held up in the hurricane aftermath in Virginia.

While some of them were waiting for generators, other family members were waiting for gas, since the generator won't run without gasoline. Gas stations were closed from Bergen County all the way down south in Hudson County. Even at my friend's gas station, although it had gasoline, the police

had placed barricades and told us that the remaining gasoline was for the police and emergencies. Then they received word that there was some gas in North Bergen so everyone rushed over there, only to find 50 people on line and another 50 cars as well wrapped around four city blocks. In this panic, Group B was driving recklessly, cursing their luck, and wishing that they had paid attention and gotten ready **BEFORE** the hurricane.

Those few who were fortunate enough to still have electricity were diligently sending text messages and inviting their friends to come and have a hot shower, charge their phones and laptops, and drink some hot tea. This invitation was so appreciated. Without communication it is difficult to know how your loved ones are doing, if they need help, etc. I was so happy when my friend texted me with an invitation, I hustled over to Ridgefield to charge my phone and four other phones. When I got there she was glued to the news, and I got sucked into watching it as the TV were a magnet. I saw eyewitnesses from Seaside Heights crying while describing what they have witnessed and experienced. There was no longer a boardwalk, and there was extreme helplessness, despair, and resignation in their expressions. "You build for years and then in two hours everything is gone, destroyed, transformed into a pile of debris and sand."

Though disasters differ in their intensity, impact, and experience, my research finds these are universal reactions to disasters (Kalayjian, 1995):

1. Shock and disbelief. In stage one of a trauma, survivors are in shock – emotionally numb, and in some cases in denial because the pain is too severe for any human to bear. Many people expressed thoughts such as, "It was surreal, like a nightmare."

2. Strong emotional response. In the second stage, the survivor is emotionally aware of the problem and feels overwhelmed and unable to cope with it.

Common Reactions in Children: 1. separation anxiety; 2. refusing to sleep or be left alone; 3. disorderly conduct; 4. regressive behaviors (thumb sucking, wetting the bed, clingy behavior); 5. hyperactivity; 6. withdrawal; 7. somatic complaints (stomachache, headache, joint aches, etc.); 8. sleep disturbances.

It is recommended that parents maintain calmness, compassion, and patience. If you are calm, open to questions, and focus on the facts, you can ease the anxiety of children who are worried about the storm. Once again, please turn off that TV, you will be traumatizing your children.

Common Reactions in Adolescents: 1. withdrawal; 2. anger; 3. increased aggression; 4. regression; 5. sleep disturbances and nightmares; 6. increased daydreaming; 7. inability to concentrate; 8. irritability; 9. drug use and addiction.

Common Reactions in Adults: 1. uncertainty and fear; 2. anger expressed toward builders and government officials; 3. feeling tense, edgy and jumpy; 4. loss of appetite; 5. sleep disturbances and nightmares 6. withdrawal; 7. loss of concentration; 8. inability to make decisions; 9. aggression (domestic violence, increased alcohol/drug use, etc.).

3. Acceptance. In this stage the survivor begins to accept the magnitude of the disaster and makes an appropriate effort to address it. Survivors feel more hopeful and goal-oriented. At this time survivors may take more specific actions to help themselves and their families. Many of us are not yet at this stage.

4. Recovery. Last but not least is the recovery stage, in which survivors feel they have returned to their pre-disaster level of functioning. A sense of adjustment and well-being is restored, and realistic memories of the traumatic experience are developed.

I began helping people in my neighborhood; some needed gasoline, and others needed candles or batteries. While driving through the streets in Bergen and Hudson Counties in New Jersey, where the traffic lights were not functioning, there were once again three types of drivers:

- a. Those who just drove through, as if they had the green light, without consideration for others;
- b. Those who stopped for a long time and let everyone else drive through while frustrated motorists piled up behind them;
- c. Those who stopped, got out, helped direct the traffic, helped others, and helped the elderly cross the street safely.

We at home welcomed Hurricane Sandy with a potluck dinner and live music. My friends, who live in nearby, gathered around, ate, played the guitar and the accordion as others sang and joined in with percussion. I remembered the Armenian song “I don’t care about palaces, caviar, and diamonds – my best friends are priceless jewels for me.” We created joy within and released it and expressed it to one another, multiplying the joy, and it was amazing. It reminded me of our Meaningfulworld motto: **“Shared sorrow is half sorrow, while shared joy is double joy.”**

In the morning it was unbelievable to witness the extent of the damage. It reminded me of Hurricane Andrew in Southern Florida in 1992, where we went to help. There as well many people didn’t evacuate, thinking it would not be a strong hurricane and then were left devastated. I would not recommend complacency, denial, or disbelief as one never knows how strong and how long a hurricane will impact a region. Have you ever wondered why they call it the “weather”? Well, because we never know with certainty “whether” it’s going to rain, how hard it’s going to rain, or how many inches of rain we will get. Meteorologists are the only professionals who are respected even when they change their mind constantly, and even if they are wrong.

In these difficult days, I was pleasantly surprised to receive calls of concern from friends, colleagues, and family from around the world: Pakistan, Armenia, California, Syria, Germany, England, Virginia, and more. It was refreshing to feel that people cared, not only nationally but internationally.

Though we had no electricity, it was so enlightening to feel the serenity after 7 P.M. when everything was dark – no electricity, no computers, no appliances running. The darkness silenced people, as they began whispering, slowing down, staying indoors, even altering their circadian rhythm (our inner biological clock). I noticed people went to sleep earlier and woke up earlier with the sunrise. We had no desktops, laptops, BlackBerries, Bluetooth, Kindles, iPads, iPhones (or other cellular phones), pagers, or faxes. Until, of course, the generators began polluting the air with their exhaust and harsh sound.

Instead we had iHeal, and we used our inner skills to entertain ourselves. We planned events with one another (those in proximity) such as walks, and while walking we helped people in need in our neighborhood; we did yoga with friends, we gathered around candles and told jokes and stories. We stayed calm, meditating and praying. Of course without electricity we could not watch TV, which was a blessing. Others were glued to their TV sets, bearing witness to the media sensationalizing all the atrocities, crying, and getting more and more upset with each news story and eyewitness account.

Kids and teenagers were not functioning well without their electrical and Internet-enabled gadgets. They could not fathom life without electricity. I sat a few of them down and had generational storytelling nights, explaining to them how people in the past lived this way, with no electricity, refrigerators, or computers. I also told them how in Africa and other countries of the developing world

the people still live without the comforts by which we are spoiled. The youth have lost their ability to converse and tell a story or a joke. They were depressed and had cabin fever. They also realized that they had not learned any phone numbers by heart – even family members could not call one another because their phones had lost battery power and they could not remember any phone numbers to call from someone else’s phone. They kept on repeating, “I cannot live another day without my phone and the Internet.”

This was an incredible educational experience for us all, individually, within families, community wide, as well as on the state and federal level. How many times have articles been written indicating that New York City is not ready for any natural disasters, but no one, including government officials, had incorporated this as a priority for planning. Planning does not start four days before a hurricane – it starts today, and it continues until there is a disaster pending.

Now, five days after the devastation, we are faced with the challenges of cleaning up, putting things in order, getting rid of all the spoiled perishable food, dealing with thousands of unread e-mails, and informing concerned communities nationally and internationally about the ordeal we faced. Sometimes I found myself not answering phone calls, because I had no energy left to repeat the same observations. Then I said to myself, why don’t you write, and then you can e-mail it to them?

The most challenging issue at this time, besides the financial loss, is the emotional drain: a week of fear, suspense, threats, and orders to fulfill, then three days of being battered by fierce winds and further terrorized by shaking buildings, apartments, walls, and roofs, as well as losing daily comforts such as showers, heat, phone, and Internet access. By the way, our rehabilitation programs in Africa, Haiti, and the Middle East, helped me tremendously to cope with these daily discomforts. Now we are literally trying to warm ourselves, wash off the dirt, leaves, and sewage, and moving on having learned valuable lessons.

While the *Global Fever* has pulled our comfort away, destroyed our beaches and structures that have stood for centuries, we are resilient and we will always rebuild, start over again. Yes, governors, mayors, and emergency rescue officials are reassuring us that we will rebuild, better than before, but the sad reality is that it will not be the same, it will not have the memories and energies of lovers hugging around the trees, carving in their initials with a heart around it to show how much they loved each other. We need time to mourn for all these losses, if we are sad we need to express that and even cry if we feel like it. Expression of sad or negative feelings is very important, especially when it is followed by validation and then lessons learned (as indicated in the 7-step Integrative Healing Model [Kalayjian, A. 1990, 2002, 2012]). It is very important to reach out and be with your loved ones, family, friends, neighbors – anyone you feel comfortable with and free to be yourself around.

In the end it is important to learn the lessons, discover a new meaning, or recover a refreshing point of view. I learned to be mindful and help others prepare better, even if they get upset with me. What is your lesson?? Share it with us, your lessons will be useful guidance and enlightenment for those who are seeking to make sense but are lost in their fear and anxiety-provoking thoughts.

In addition, we cannot drive anywhere because we have a gasoline shortage. We must drive from town to town, and if we’re lucky wait five hours for a few gallons of gasoline for our vehicles or generators. We cannot drive to work to New York as we must have three people in the vehicle, and tunnels and several bridges are closed (only the Lincoln Tunnel is open at times).

The wounds are fresh, so we are all making sense of the disaster, searching to find our feelings, being grateful, patient, and compassionate. “That which does not kill us makes us stronger,” said the philosopher Friederich Nietzsche. Although I have worked in the field of disaster relief, preparedness, recovery, and rehabilitation since 1988, I echo what Socrates said:

***Whatever authority I may have,
Rests solely on knowing how
Little I know***



Here are some useful resources for emotional preparedness:

Mental Health Preparedness: Hurricane Season

As hurricane season begins, it is important to be both physically and psychologically prepared. The following resources can help prepare you and your family for the potential arrival of a hurricane.

American Psychological Association:

- [Prepare Now for Hurricane Season](#)
- [Preparing Mentally for Disasters](#)
- [Tips to Strengthen your Emotional Well-Being before the Arrival of a Hurricane](#)
- [The Road to Resilience](#)

American Red Cross:

- [Hurricane Safety Checklist](#)
- [New York - from Governor Cuomo](#)

FEMA:

- [Hurricane Preparedness Tips](#)

CDC:

- [Hurricanes](#)

National Weather Service:

- [National Hurricane Center](#)
- [Hurricane Preparedness](#)

Shell, an Airbnb host in Brooklyn, is offering her five guest rooms to stranded travelers and locals - for free. She provides an example of how we can all help.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Be Red Cross Ready: Hurricane Safety Checklist. Red Cross. Accessible at <http://www.redcross.org/www-files/Documents/pdf/Preparedness/checklists/Hurricane.pdf>

Emergency Preparedness and Response: Hurricanes, Cyclones, Typhoons, and other Tropical Storms. Centers for Disease Control. Accessible at <http://emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes/>

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