

Psychology of Disastrous Events and Recovery

Excerpted from IFMA's Emergency Preparedness Workshop 2005, Glin Jay CFM, CFMJ, IFMA Fellow

When incidents occur, organizations are judged by what they do and by how those actions are communicated during and after the event. A businesses' credibility can be ruined and its ability to continue (e.g., remain profitable, maintain customer base) can be impaired if communications related to incidents are poorly handled. In one case, management of a new office complex refused to recognize occupants' complaints regarding indoor environmental quality. So confident was the management team that they stonewalled the press and public, as well as their own employees.

The situation escalated to a vicious protest. Extensive media coverage eventually embarrassed management into testing the building. Deficiencies were found; thus, vindicating the occupants and presenting management as uncaring ogres. To this day, there remains lingering doubt about the safety of working in that building.

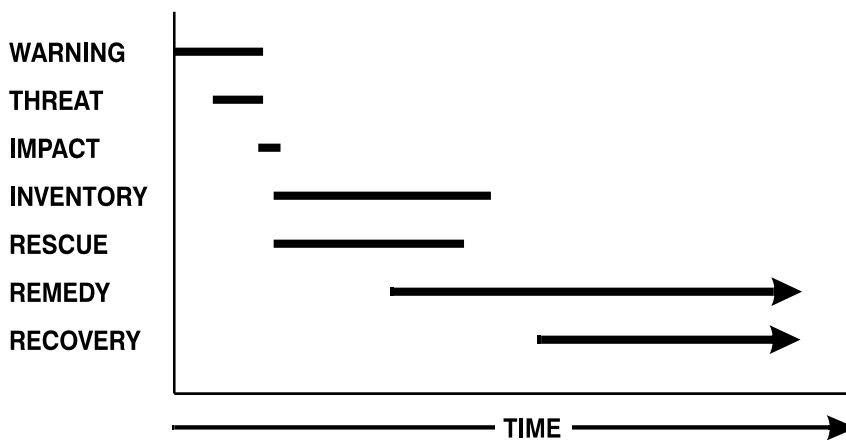
Emergencies are not the time to conceive creative solutions. Much of the education, training and preparations done in advance of emergencies are intended to minimize the amount of decision-making needed during emergencies. Experience has shown that being prepared reduces the number of losses during crisis and increases the likelihood that an enterprise will remain in business following the episode. This chapter deals with the psychosocial aspects of recovery from emergency events.

Although business is done by people, it is only when the workforce returns to an enterprise or is replaced, that the business can reestablish itself and move forward. In this chapter you will learn how to:

1. Understand the psychology of people during emergencies.
2. Recognize when symptoms of an emergency are prolonged, preventing a full recovery.
3. Identify the range of social and medical services to include in the business continuity plan.
4. Ensure that the event, its survivors and victims, are respectfully remembered and honored, thus allowing all those affected to put the episode behind them and reestablish their life.

Psychological Response to Emergencies

People generally progress through a fairly predictable sequence of behaviors when a disaster strikes (see "Standard Disaster Model" diagram below). There are seven more or less distinct stages, beginning when normal routines are first disrupted, continuing through the period of disruption caused by the disaster event, and eventually ending with the emergence of a new stable routine (Baker and Chapman, 1962; Kroll-Smith and Couch, 1993).



The seven-stage standard disaster model, showing the sequence of events and a general indication of their relative duration.

- ◆ **Warning:** During the “warning” stage, people are apprehensive about the possibility of a disaster or emergency.
- ◆ **Threat:** By the “threat” stage, there are unequivocal signs of the approaching disaster.
- ◆ **Impact:** The “impact” stage is the most intense point, when the flying debris, walls of fire, or torrential floods destroys any last vestiges of normal life. After this, there may be considerable pain and grief, but the destruction is over.
- ◆ **Inventory and Rescue:** The “inventory” and “rescue” stages follow immediately. Survivors begin to piece together what has happened, assess or inventory their losses, and start to comprehend the impacts of the disaster event. Survivor groups spontaneously emerge and begin the rescue process—treating the wounded, freeing trapped victims, and extinguishing fires.
- ◆ **Remedy:** In the “remedy” stage, relief agencies take control of the disaster scene and impose a formal structure on people’s inventory and rescue stages.
- ◆ **Recovery:** During the “recovery” stage, the disaster environment is replaced by reestablishing the old structure or beginning a new pattern of life.

Natural disasters tend to be episodic. The entire process may take place in a matter of minutes, or it may develop over an extended period of time, but the

extreme environment is usually a short-lived event. It is a horrendous period bounded before and after by periods of stability. For example, the eruption of Mount Saint Helens in Washington State had been anticipated for weeks before it occurred. But less than an hour passed between the extended threat stage, the actual impact, and commencement of the inventory and rescue.

By contrast, many technological emergencies become chronic conditions. This is particularly true of contamination events such as the escape of radioactive gases from a nuclear power plant or toxic pollutants in the soil or water. Such contamination events have social impacts fundamentally different from those of natural disasters. They scare people and evoke a dread that cannot readily be calmed by coolheaded, logical reasoning. By its very nature, a crisis is generally unbounded, and there is little, if any, experience in dealing with the specifics.

It may take years from the time a hazardous substance is discovered in the environment to the time people realize that most of the damage has already been done. The warning and threat stages of the impending hazard can be so long and drawn out that they become a more or less permanent way of life. There is no brief, terrifying event followed by a relatively longer period of inventory, rescue, remedy, and recovery, as occurs with natural disasters. Instead, the stress of an apprehended but uncertain danger persists—often for years and can become a chronic condition.

Chemicals leaching invisibly through the ground may give indications that danger is present, but the signals are often vague and open to dispute. The apprehension of residents near Love Canal in New York lasted for years until they were permanently moved out of the area. The 1986 explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Ukraine dispersed radioactive particles over a wide geographic area, extending from Scandinavia to Greece and into northern Asia. But the fallout was invisible, and the level of radiation varied greatly over the affected area.

At high exposures, the health effects of radiation occur quickly, but at lower levels, symptoms may take a long time to appear. It is much more difficult to link illnesses to an event long ago because the individual could have been exposed to so many other causal factors. Cancers such as leukemia might only manifest themselves after years or decades and numerous environmental pollutants have been implicated as causative agents. Estimates of future deaths from the Chernobyl disaster range from a few thousand to tens of thousands. It took months for some consensus to develop about which areas were safe to live in, where people should be evacuated, what level of contamination was safe, or what food could be eaten. The period of apprehension for those affected by Chernobyl will be long indeed.

Extended warning and threat stages strain the coping abilities of a community, particularly if only some members are affected. When just a few people

experience a chronic cough, always feel tired, or develop repeated upper respiratory infections, it is unclear whether there is a real health threat. Alternative explanations are possible and reasonable. The scattered individual incidents can be treated as personal problems rather than as a threat that demands community action. Workplace health issues commonly occur in this way. The technological hazards are rarely so severe that everyone is affected. Instead, only a small number of office occupants develop symptoms. Threats of terrorism punctuated with the occasional impact create an atmosphere of uncertainty and overtax peoples' ability to cope.

A long period of ambiguous warning and threat destabilizes established patterns of social interaction and relationships. There is disagreement on reality—some people claim to be in grave danger, whereas others see the situation as less serious or no threat at all. This disagreement on the fundamental reality of the situation further increases the level of uncertainty and makes it more difficult for people to cope. They turn to neighbors or coworkers for support and are uncertain of receiving a sympathetic response. So they tend to seek out people who are prepared to see the situation as they do or people who share their beliefs.

In natural disasters, all segments of a community tend to move through disaster stages at the same time, and there is a tendency for shared experience to increase cooperation. But in chronic technological disasters, there is not the same agreement about the nature and severity of the problem. There may not even be consensus on whether the feared event has occurred. This is particularly true of hazards that pollute the soil, air, or water. There is commonly a high degree of confusion and uncertainty about which areas are contaminated, whether there is a health risk, and what action should be taken.

Without a shared understanding of the event, individuals, organizations, and experts working to mitigate the problem respond on the basis of their unique assessments of the situation. As a result, the actions of one group may appear inappropriate or even dangerous to those who interpret the circumstances differently. The greater the perceived risks and the longer the uncertainty persists, the greater the social conflict that is generated.

The coping mechanisms normally used by groups and individuals to deal with invisible and uncertain threats may exacerbate the psychological stress. Coping behavior can itself become a cause of illness. As the level of uncertainty increases and the danger is perceived to be more severe, people's form of coping tends to shift from predominantly rational deductive-reasoning processes to the acceptance of emotional beliefs that are backed by a supportive group. Under these conditions, beliefs are psychologically more satisfying because they provide a desperately needed sense of predictability. There is not sufficient information for a satisfying course of action to be deduced by reasoning alone.

MANAGING THE FEAR FACTOR

Fear management is crucial. This is increasingly relevant in light of the terrorist attacks and threat of chemical and/or biological attacks since 2001. Fear and its consequences can be the biggest obstacle to the response to and recovery from emergencies. In responding to these human threats, it is also important to look beyond just getting people out of harm's way. All would agree that the first order of response is to establish human safety. However, drills for how to evacuate have resulted in accidents. With some chemical agents, it is safer to remain in the building and *not* to evacuate. Occupants need to control their fear and desire to flee as some emergencies may require that they stay where they are and wait for a rescue. What happens before and after an emergency will likely stay with individuals for the rest of their lives.

Re-establish the Business and the Community

Restoration following a disaster is complete when the business, its employees, and the community have reestablished a routine and returned to daily life. Depending on the type of disaster and how well the BC/EP plan worked, the event can pass quickly or drag on for years.

WHEN IS THE EMERGENCY OVER?

The emergency is over when all those affected agree that the episode happened and that it has ended. An earthquake continues to concern people until no more aftershocks are felt. Even then, many people remain anxious, anticipating the next seismic event. However, the earthquake event is over after all those affected agree that the specific ground movement has stopped. The likelihood of another quake, some years hence, would be another emergency event, distinct from the current event.

If there is a long period of ambiguity concerning the cessation of an emergency event, the established patterns of social interaction and relationships can become destabilized. This occurs when there is disagreement regarding the level of danger surrounding the event. Some people claim to be in grave danger, whereas others see the episode as finished and the chance of future occurrences as less serious or as posing no threat at all. Disagreement on the fundamental reality of the situation increases the level of uncertainty. Feeling uncertain of what is safe and what is dangerous makes it difficult for people to cope with their job or family life. People in this situation often turn to neighbors or coworkers for support. If they do not receive a sympathetic response, they tend to seek out people who see the situation as they do and share their beliefs/fears. Although this gives people comfort in the short-term, it postpones the conclusion

of the emergency event, preventing the community from reestablishing bonds with all its previous members.

ALL STAKEHOLDERS REBUILD AND GO ON

Following an emergency event, those individuals who have been affected need to know what the company's expectations are regarding business resumption. At a minimum, the stakeholders include:

- ◆ Employees
- ◆ Visitors to the site—vendors, service and repair people and customers
- ◆ Relatives of all of the above
- ◆ Suppliers
- ◆ Building owner
- ◆ Investors and shareholders
- ◆ Immediate neighbors and local community
- ◆ Extended community
- ◆

All stakeholders will want information to help them decide what they will do. Without compromising recovery efforts, all known information should be shared with stakeholders. Ideally the information should include accurate details about the incident, the victims, and families and the ability of the business to recover. Actions taken by management since the incident and what management is planning to do are important to stakeholders. Specifically, employees need to know what they can expect from the company and what the company expects from them at this time.

For the rebuilding process, it is better for employees to return to work as quickly as work-site conditions allow. It will not quite be "business as usual," as the emphasis will be on meeting personal needs as well as business needs. Nonetheless, it is healthier for people to return to the workplace and their colleagues.

ON-GOING SUPPORT

In the wake of a crisis—after damaged buildings have been rebuilt and computer systems have been reestablished—the human damage can continue. About 200,000 new cases of post-traumatic stress disorder occur each year, with related costs of approximately \$100 billion annually (Paulk, 2001).

The effects of a traumatic experience should begin to diminish within a few days of the incident. Should the effects linger for more than a week, the individual may need additional assistance. The following list of symptoms may indicate that an individual is not rebounding from the event and may need traumatic stress counseling.

- ◆ Individual displays an unusual disinterest in or disregard for work
- ◆ Deadlines are missed
- ◆ Increased difficulty in handling assignments
- ◆ Makes unusual mistakes or uses poor judgment as compared to former performance
- ◆ Increased absenteeism or lateness
- ◆ Visibly upset (e.g., worried, fearful or preoccupied)
- ◆ Demonstrates mood swings
- ◆ Isolates from others
- ◆ Unusually argumentative - irritability or even intense anger
- ◆ Difficulty in recalling instructions, details, etc.
- ◆ Alternating periods of high and low productivity
- ◆ Over-reaction to real or imagined criticism
- ◆ Cannot sit still, jumpy, easy to startle
- ◆ Anxiety about discussing the event
- ◆ In general, the behavioral patterns are unusual (not typical) for this individual

TRUST, CONFIDENCE AND THE FUTURE

It is very important to the recovery that individuals in positions of respect and authority acknowledge the significance of the incident. Those affected need to understand what happened and will expect to receive regular communications—during and after the emergency.

Gathering people for meetings is very important. It allows a collective understanding of events and a sharing of emotions. These meetings provide people with much needed information, predictability and a form of stress reduction. Even though things may still be chaotic and some details unknown, it is important for the recovery that people be given as many facts about the incident as possible. As appropriate, include specific management representatives to address technical information, special human resource provisions, latest information on victims' status, etc.

Use these sessions to build trust among the many people who have been affected and those responsible for the future, to dispel rumors and gain a consensus for the rebuilding. These meetings set the foundation to prepare employees for the transition from the crisis-impacted work site to their homes, or for the next shift workers just arriving. Participation at these meetings should be mandatory for all employees. If not, employees may avoid the meetings, viewing them as unwanted reminders of the incident. To their detriment, they would miss out on the important psychosocial benefits and shared learning that happens at these gatherings.

Everyone will be affected by the event to varying degrees. All people need to be aware that they may experience strong emotional and possible physical reactions

to the event (e.g., sleep and appetite disturbances, flashbacks and anxiety). Here are some suggestions regarding what to say and do when gathering those who have been affected:

- ◆ Review the common physical, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (thinking) signs and symptoms of traumatic stress.
- ◆ Prepare a handout explaining traumatic stress and the normal symptoms of stress.
- ◆ Assure people that their reactions are normal and that others will be having the same or similar reactions.
- ◆ Encourage people to resolve their emotions now, with the community, rather than bury their feelings.

Encourage people to ask questions and express their concerns. Discuss concerns in as much detail as possible to address and dispel rumors or unfounded concerns. Make resources available to discuss with people individually and privately, as not everyone is comfortable speaking out in a group or revealing their personal issues.

If the incident was highly traumatic, a “buddy” system may be helpful. Pair off names and phone numbers and have them call their buddy starting on the evening of the incident to talk and check up on each other. Continue to do so as long as is necessary. Anyone concerned about their buddy should know whom to call for assistance, such as employee assistance (EAP), human resources (HR), or a special team designated in the business recovery plan.

Have everyone fill out a crisis information form. These forms assess the status of each employee based on their symptoms. The forms generally ask about the individual’s physical and emotional reaction to the traumatic stress and ask the employee to rate the degree to which they are experiencing those reactions. The forms can help identify individuals at risk and assess the general state of the employee base. Individuals at risk may react to the shock by feeling confused and dissociated or dazed. In that state, they may cause an accident. Provide transportation for them, as they should not drive. Furthermore, individuals so affected may need medical assistance.

Remembrance And Memorial

Following traumatic events, people will want to share condolences and honor the victims. It is recommended that survivors find some level of forgiveness related to the event, but that they not forget their loved ones or the lessons learned. It is a way to say “good-bye” and “thank-you” to those who helped.