THE MYTHS OF RESPONSE TO DISASTER BY PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

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Introduction

Comparatively few people experience a disaster directly, yet it is a highly emotional situation which occupies a place in the thoughts and daydreams of everyone. Both children and adults tend to ask themeselves "how would I cope"? This is a way of finding out about oneself, of confronting fears and preparing for any eventuality.

The strong need to know how people react leads the media to present many accounts of people coping with disaster. The various character types and their responses can readily be predicted. These accounts rely on emotion for their popularity, but lead to grossly inaccurate descriptions of human behaviour.

Another source of distortion is the difficulty people have in maintaining an accurate view of strongly emotionally charged situations. There is on the one hand, a tendency to minimise events and deny their effects, with the aim of showing they ae not as threatening as they seem. On the other hand, there is also a tendency to over-dramatise important events and show that no one can do anything about them, and things will never by the same again. This approach is one which takes satisfaction in the disaster, and leads to failure to recognise the endurance and resilience of people and communities in the face of extreme situations.

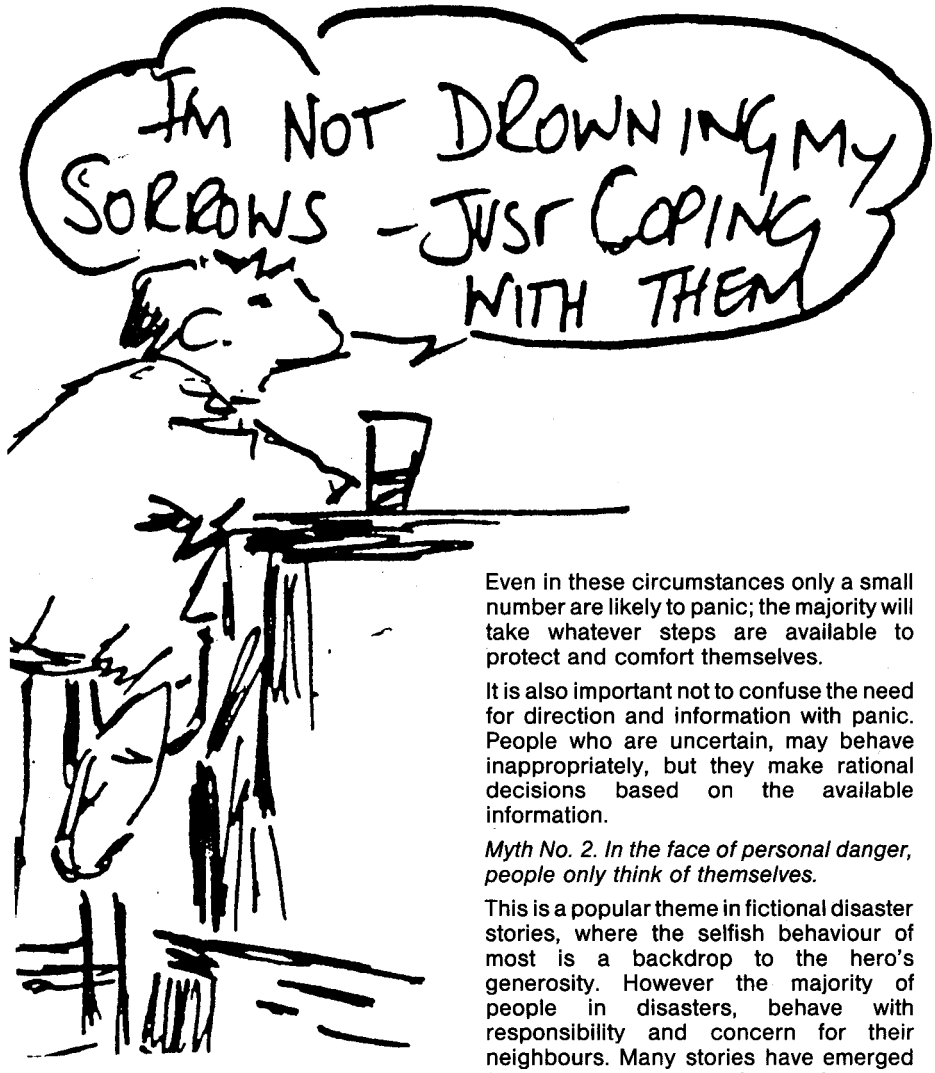
It is understandable, then, that myths should develop about disasters, but proper understanding and planning requires them to be identified and corrected.

A number of the most common myths are dealt with below.

Myth No. 1. People in danger, panic

The idea of panic involves two things. First, loss of control leading to unthinking, impulsive behaviours; second, selfish concern to save oneself even at the expense of others if necessary.

Experience and research show that *panic is very rare* in disasters. *Normal people react to danger by doing the best they can for themselves and those with them.* They



may even make mistakes from lack of knowledge or confusion, which may even cost them or others their lives. But that is not panic.

The circumstances under which panic is most likely to occur are when:

a. people do not have adequate information about what is happening;

b. there is an immediate perceived threat of death or serious injury:

c. the people feel themselves to be trapped or a means of escape is blocked; and

d. there is a lack of leadership and direction.

Even in these circumstances only a small number are likely to panic; the majority will take whatever steps are available to protect and comfort themselves.

It is also important not to confuse the need for direction and information with panic. People who are uncertain, may behave inappropriately, but they make rational decisions based on the available information.

Myth No. 2. In the face of personal danger, people only think of themselves.

This is a popular theme in fictional disaster stories, where the selfish behaviour of most is a backdrop to the hero's generosity. However the majority of people in disasters, behave with responsibility and concern for their neighbours. Many stories have emerged from the recent bushfires, of people endangering their own lives to ensure others were safe, of men helping save a neighbour's house while their own burned.

There are always stories of self interest in all disasters, but although they tend to get the most publicity, they are far from repreresentative. Disaster planning should take account of the fact that most people will think of others in an emergency.

Myth No. 3. Too much information is likely to scare people into behaving erratically.

It is sometimes thought that people are unable to handle information about a

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threat to themselves or their property, that it will cause panic or they will over-react. It is true that if information is incomplete, vague, or ambiguous, its effect on a group or community will be unpredicable and often unhelpful. However, on the other hand it had been found that people are reluctant to believe in the reality of a threat which is unexpected and outside their ordinary experience. Some people refuse to be evacuated even when urged to do so by Police.

The evidence is that the majority of people react responsibly to the information they are given. They usually check it and look to familiar people for guidance and leadership, such as friends and relatives, even if they are outside the threatened area. Sometimes, however the information is misleading or inaccurate. Information about an impending disaster should be provided by someone known and trusted, or in an appropriate official position. It should be clear and concise about the nature of the threat, the likelihood of it occurring and the possible conditions which may affect it. It should also include suggested courses of action. Categorical statements such as 'there is no threat', should be avoided unless it is quite certain. It is better to be specific about the situation at a given time and provide later information on the altered situation, than to be vague or try to cover too many possibilities.

Myth No. 4. People do not react with severe emotional disturbance when there is no effect from the disaster on them.

This idea is based on the assumption that crisis situations cause people to break down and when they do so, they produce symptoms of mental illness. Where this does not happen, the expectation is the the person has "coped" and will not be affected by it, other than perhaps temporary reactions.

Serious mental disturbance occurs in only a very small number of cases. The majority of people employ the strengths and skills they have and meet the demands of the situation. At the same time, the stress of the disaster experience and the lengthy recovery process can be expected to have its effects on all of those involved. These problems are in the nature of *normal reactions to an abnormal situation.* However these reactions need to be understood. Most people will need extra help during the recovery period, even if only from family and friends. If these response-appropriate reactions are understood and recognised, they can be anticipated and dealt with before they develop into more serious problems, or cause major interferences to the ongoing events of regular life, such as child rearing and marriage.

Myth No. 5. Children are not affected by disasters.

This view is based on the fact that children may show initial obvious signs like nightmares, fears and immature behaviour, but then appear to go back to normal functioning. Children often appear to cope with extraordinary circumstances, without apparent changes in behaviour. Their awareness of events is closely related to the way their parents and other adults experience them. If the adults cope well, the children adapt readily: if not, children become frightened or confused, but often tend to keep their distress to themselves, especially if they sense the adults are unsure of how to handle it.

Children also 'postpone' their responses until they get the 'all clear'. This means they only feel safe to express their concerns in terms of the disaster events, but in terms of everyday family or other problems. These often go unrecognised as disaster repercussions. Failing to see the connection between the disaster and later problems, leads parents and teachers to misunderstand the behaviour and treat it in ways that may make matters worse.

Myth No. 6. That a community affected by a disaster will fall apart or never recover.

This belief originates from a sensitivity to the far reaching social impact of a disaster. It recognises that such a traumatic event causes permanent changes to the community. If 'recovery' is taken to mean returning to how things were before the disaster, then the community will indeed never recover. What does happen however, is that communities that are not completely obliterated by the disaster, reconstruct themselves and gradually assimilate the disaster into their history, and continue a process of development. Communities, like healthy people, have a capacity to adapt to dramatic events and go on with life. What needs to be emphasized is *how* the community should alter its pre-disaster functioning plans, in order to take the disaster related changes into account.

Myth No. 7. Workers in the disaster situation are not affected by the disaster.

There is a natural tendency to separate people in a disaster situation into two groups:

a. Those affected, the 'victims'; and

b. Those not affected, the relief workers.

However, anybody entering the disaster setting becomes involved in emotionally powerful experiences. Seeing the destruction, hearing people's stories, the stress and confusion of the situation, all place heavy demands on those whose role is to help. Sometimes these demands, if not recognised and dealt with, can result in health problems in workers or their families, some of which may not show up until a considerable time after the event.

Another hazard of neglecting the effect on the workers is that their performance is affected, and especially those with planning or administrative responsibilities, may have their judgement distorted by their own feelings. This may result in neglecting some needs, giving inappropriate assistance or creating more problems, by misunderstanding the requirements of the situation. The human error factor is responsible for waste, inefficiency and needless distress in recovery operations and one way of reducing it, is to acknowledge and cater for the emotional and psychological impact on workers.

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Myth No. 8. Talking about problems makes them happen.

It is common for people responsible for human services in disaster-affected communities to be reluctant to openly discuss potential problems that might occur or to enquire directly about the well being of those they serve. The view is often expressed that mentioning problems will make people anxious, talk them into problems, or create them where they do not exist. This attitude is based on the natural feeling that if people are not overtly presenting problems, then they are coping. Hence it is felt the more they are encouraged to talk about problems the worse they will be.

Although a very small proportion of the population may be highly alarmed by any reference to problems, the majority are 'copers' who will endeavour to get on with life in spite of what it brings.

However experience shows that the disaster, and the recovery period following, bring many problems which take their toll personally. Too often these are aggravated by feelings of isolation, lack of knowledge of what to expect of themselves, or not knowing what others are going through. Identifying and acknowledging problems enables people of all ages to better employ their own capacities to cope or solve them, and if the open discussion of typical potential problems is sensitive and tactful it will generally be found to be reassuring. Many people go to great lengths to conceal problems because they believe they are the only ones with them. They are enormously relieved to hear they are not alone and that others are prepared to enquire and assist them.

Myths have been dispelled by knowledge. Increasing research on disasters is being done to gain a better understanding accumulated from many different sources, to serve as a basis to antipated the effects on people, families and social systems in recovering from them, or avoiding some of the possible longer term repercussions.

However, the understanding of these effects is at an early stage and the knowledge of how to avoid or assist them is even less well developed. Unfortunately, it is only by accumulating more experiences of human suffering in disasters, that this knowledge can be gained.

The following table summarises these myths:

Myth	Reality	Planning Implications
1. People panic	People behave rationally and responsibly except where there is a threat, no escape, no information, no leadership.	Plan for people to make responsible, reasonable decisions.
2. People look after themselves	People generally care for each other, helping those in need where possible.	Utilise people's wish to help each other.
3. Too much information is bad	People respond more appropriately to information and check it with those they know, before acting.	Provide clear, accurate information readily from familiar people or recognised authorities.
4. Children are too young to be affected	After immediate responses, children hold back needs until after the crisis. Needs then attach to other normal problems.	Children and families need to have long term support available.
5. If people don't crack up they are not affected	Few people crack up, everyone is affected and suffer stress in varying degrees.	Community and worker education on stress effects and support.
6. Communities never recover from disaster	Communities undergo permanent change which has to be integrated with past and future.	Intergrate recovery with local structures, past and future.
7. Workers are not affected	Workers are also victims of disaster related stress in varying degrees.	All services require debriefing and support for staff involved in disaster, along with appropriate adaption of administrative methods and techniques of working.
8. Talking about problems makes them happen.	Most people will have a variety of personal problems. Isolation compounds them.	Provide tactful information on typical problems. Enquire sensitively about supports needed.

Extract from "Disasters" The International Journal of Disaster Studies and Practice Vol. 8, 1984, No. 2, Page 138.

Government and community support for disaster research is strong in the immediate aftermath of disaster. But it decreases as memories of the disaster fade into history. Having learned that "it *can* happen here," we revert so easily to the cosy assumption that "it *can't* happen here." Then all those exhortations that we must discover what went wrong in our various disaster responses and ensure that the same mistakes are not made in future are forgotten – so that, when the next disaster strikes, we are unlikely to be much better prepared.

Of course this is a generalization, for some communities are clearly more disaster-prone than others and therefore somewhat more disaster-prepared. But none is totally immune. The sequence described above is an all-too-familiar talking-point among disaster researchers. Thus many of us have found ourselves, at one time or another, advancing the paradoxical proposition that, if only disaster came more frequently, then we would be better prepared and they would be less disastrous.

Dr. R. L. Wettenhall

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DISASTER	causes among affected people	therefore they need
Results in loss, material & personal	dependance	resources
causes disruption	uncertainty	information
results in	intense emotional/ physical response	sustaining relationships, skilled care and support

Extracted from an address by Rev. John Hill, Chairman, Victorian State Community Recovery Sub-committee at the Australian Counter Disaster College, Mt. Macedon, Victoria, 1986.

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