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PROFESSIONAL EXCHANGE

Confronting the Realities of Volunteering for a National Disaster

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Responding to a national appeal for mental health volunteers to assist with disaster relief efforts is an altruistic act. However, the reality of the actual work of a mental health volunteer can be jarring. In the course of providing services to traumatized individuals, mental health providers are in a position to share the emotional burden of the trauma, become a witness to the damage, recognize the realities of dealing with federal and state agencies, and observe the inequitable distribution of resources. The following is my story of what it was like before, during, and after my experience as a mental health volunteer in the Gulfport/Biloxi, Mississippi area two months after the destruction of August 2005. I hope that sharing my story will encourage other mental health counselors to play a role in responding to the needs created by events like Hurricane Katrina.

Most Americans were shocked by the level of destruction and devastation that Hurricane Katrina left in its path in August 2005. When the call was sent out for mental health workers, many of us wanted to do what we could to help; to utilize our training during an incredible situation with dire need. I decided to respond to that call. This is my story of what it was like before, during, and after my experience as a mental health volunteer in the Gulfport/Biloxi, Mississippi area two months after the destruction. I hope that sharing my story will encourage other mental health counselors to play a role in responding to the needs created by events like Hurricane Katrina.

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THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS TO GO

When I first heard about the hurricane that was going to hit the southern coast, I did not think that it would have any impact on me. I thought that the residents and community leaders would be able to handle the situation. That area had been hit by many terrible hurricanes in the past, so what was different about this one? Surely, they would know what to do, and be able to respond effectively. Why would they need me?

Soon, however, as I began hearing the stories of the devastation, lack of organization, and deplorable conditions that residents of the area were contending with, I felt a pain in my gut that I knew I could not ignore. Thus, I decided to apply to be a mental health volunteer. Due to the extreme and urgent need in the area, I was not required to go through any training. I downloaded the application from the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (AAMFT) and quickly filled it out. There had been such an incredible outpouring of support from mental health providers, that I did not know when or if I would be called to go. The pain in my gut went away because I had done what I had to do. Now it was out of my control.

Six weeks later, on Tuesday, October 19, 2005, I received the call from the Red Cross to be "deployed" to the hurricane stricken area immediately. They informed me to call into headquarters the next day for orientation and that I would be leaving on Sunday, October 24, 2005, to Gulfport, Mississippi. Because flights into Gulfport/Biloxi were limited, I would have to fly into Mobile, Alabama, rent a car and drive to Gulfport.

My anxiety was very high. I had never done anything like this. Why would I do this now? I had important responsibilities at home, which included four children, a husband, supervisees, a budding private practice, and an adjunct faculty position. It would be easy to say no. I did not know any of these people. There would be no long-term consequences for me if I did not go. That familiar pain in my gut returned stronger than ever. Nevertheless, rather than continually second-guessing my decision, I moved forward. In less than six hours, I had every loose end of my life tied up for the next two weeks.

My flight left in the early afternoon, so I was able to go to church. I cried almost the entire service without knowing why. I believed I was being "called" to help, but I was already helping others. That is why I chose this profession. I still had second thoughts and doubts until I said goodbye to my family and boarded the airplane to an area I had never been to before. I experienced the whole gamut of emotions: fear, hope, anxiety, compassion, humility, anger, and trepidation to name just a few.

DIFFICULT BEGINNINGS

Sea Bee Base

Once I landed in Mobile, Alabama, I called a phone number to get instructions. I was instructed to rent a car and given directions to the Sea Bee Base in Gulfport, Mississippi. What!?! I would be staying in military barracks? I knew this had to be a mistake. There had to be a hotel room available somewhere. Maybe it would only be for one night. Therefore, as day turned to night, I found my way to the base. Guards with large guns instructed me as to where to go. I pulled up to a huge brick building. Suitcases in hand, I was told to report to the front desk. My accommodations for the next two weeks consisted of four large brick rooms that had housed as many as 1200 people. There were a few rules that had to be followed: lights out 2200, lights on 0600, no sex, no drugs, no alcohol. I was told to go pick up my bedding, select a cot and get dinner. Looking around, I saw a sea of cots with men and women of every size, shape, color, and age mingling around. After getting my bedding, which consisted of scratchy sheets and an even scratchier blanket, I picked out a cot and began setting up my things. Little did I realize that this would be the extent of my personal space for the next two weeks.

After the long drive, I needed to use the bathroom. Approximately 75 chemical toilets surrounded the building. At home, I would sooner drive 20 minutes out of my way or wait until my eyes were floating to avoid using a port-a-potty. Showers were in a trailer and sinks were outside. What, I wondered, had I gotten myself into?

Luckily, the situation was similar to going away to college. People were from all over the country, including Canada. No one knew anyone else. I had the privilege of sleeping next to a female retired nurse on one side and a male Vietnam veteran on the other. At that time, there were more than 600 people sleeping in this huge building that had previously stored large military equipment. As my one bunkmate so eloquently explained his living conditions to his wife, "We are so close together that to the right, I can hear the person's heart skip a beat, and to the left, I can see the person's dream." People were friendly and teasingly called me the "newbie."

At 1950 hours, one of the people in charge began walking up and down the building shouting, "Lights out, 10 minutes!" I changed into my sweats in a changing area and got ready for bed. Lights really went out at 2200 hours. I felt like a child again being told it was time for bed.

Sleep did not come easily that night. Large fans covered the muffled sounds of conversation, snoring, tossing and turning. In the middle of the night, my bunkmate who was screaming with arms and legs flailing in the air awakened me. He quieted down after a minute and went back to sleep.

I silently began to cry. This was beyond what I could handle—or so I thought.

First Full Day

I did not sleep well that first night. I finally got out of bed around 0430 hours. I was told the line for the women's showers had been as long as 45 minutes. As I walked about a half a block past the "soldiers" of port-a-potties, I finally made it to the showers. Showering, I would soon discover, would be the only time each day during the two weeks when I was alone. Once showered, I went outside to blow dry my hair. It was cold outside, and you could see the steam coming off my head. Coming from Ohio, I did not think it would be so cold and had not brought any warm clothing. I smiled at people but did not participate in conversation. Somehow, I felt a need to protect myself.

After breakfast, I took the shuttle to headquarters. I turned in the copies of my professional licenses, filled out my paperwork to obtain an ID, cell phone, credit card with $700, and was off to a general orientation. There was little additional information given regarding my responsibilities. I met my new supervisor who would be leaving the next day and was paired up with another mental health worker, a psychologist from the east coast who specialized in working with children. We loaded up a minivan with blankets, bedrolls, first aid kits, snacks, sodas, and water, and off we went. I was ready to go, ready to do what I came down to do, which was to help those affected by the hurricane.

As we drove to our assigned area, she oriented me to the community and to our responsibilities. We were to stop when we saw people, identify ourselves, let them tell their stories, hook them up to community resources if necessary or available, offer them supplies, and then be on our way.

Traveling by van, I noticed many downed tree branches and blue tarps on roofs. I commented, "This doesn't look too bad." As we continued to drive towards the ocean, I became more and more shocked by the debris and level of destruction. Houses were broken apart like building blocks knocked over by a child. Naked trees were twisted into unnatural positions. Boats that had been in the water were lying on their sides two blocks from the ocean. Cars were crumbled into perverse shapes. Grass and concrete were peeled away to show the bare earth. Houses floated off their pylons 30 feet away and landed with their bottoms flared out like Dorothy's house in the *Wizard of Oz*. Was this real? I became overwhelmed with the feeling of being so small and lacking power. How was I supposed to deal with this? No mental health training prepared me for this experience.

We drove for over an hour as the scene of debris, destruction, and devastation repeated itself. Seeing many people trying to clean up, I wanted to stop. My colleague informed me, "Not yet." I became frustrated with having to wait. These people needed help and that was why I was there. The agony of what had happened to these people was too much. Finally, I cried. Later, in retrospect, I realized that it was important that I was first flooded with the destruction so that I would be able to focus on the people in the community and their needs and not respond to my own issues.

Along with the debris scattered throughout the area, I could not help but notice large piles of clothes at major intersections, a tennis court, and a car wash. After the hurricane, people organized clothing drives. I knew of one person who, with the help of the company she worked for, stuffed a semi trailer full of clothes. Even though she could not find a place to accept the clothes, she informed the driver to start driving. When he arrived, he was unable to find anyone to take the clothes so he unloaded them in an area where people could get them. Therefore, in addition to providing some help for the people of the area, it contributed to the disarray and chaos.

Another powerful reminder of the storm's destruction was a bright, spray-painted X on the front of every house, boat and car. At the top of the X the National Guard indicated the day they were there (e.g., 9-1 for September 1). To the right of the X, the home state of the unit was listed (e.g. OH for Ohio), while information related to whether or not anyone was found in the structure, alive or dead, was provided at the bottom of the X. Finally, to the left of the X was an indication as to whether or not pets were found. As I looked at the dates, I realized that some of these places were not inspected until five or six days after the storm had come through.

Finally, we got out and began talking to people. We introduced ourselves and offered very cold sodas or water, which were readily accepted. They were glad to see us and appreciated our help. They shared their stories of what their houses used to look like, and what their plans were. Most residents were committed to the community and planned on staying and rebuilding. Consistently, they indicated that there were many others who had it much worse than they did and thus, initially would not accept any other items from our vehicle. However, by the time we said our goodbyes, their arms were full of much needed supplies.

While driving around the neighborhoods, we met up with two groups of migrant workers. Some had lived in the area before the hurricane struck, and others had come in the hopes of making money to send home to their families. They had no respirators or work gloves, little food or clothing,

and they were sleeping on the floors of the houses they were cleaning up. Their employers were not consistently paying them. Some wanted to return home, some wanted to continue working. One person indicated that his friends were outside barbecuing and drinking beer when the hurricane hit. Six of his friends died.

By 1800 hours, I was exhausted yet exhilarated. My colleague wanted to go to another community to talk to some people at a similar organization helping the residents. One of the leaders of that group requested that we talk to some families with children about what their children were experiencing. Arriving at the site, we could not help but notice a large geometric white tent strategically placed in the front parking lot of an abandoned strip mall. Inside, volunteers were serving dinner and getting ready to watch Monday Night Football. Several families were invited to sit in on the discussion, but no one was interested. Apparently, this was the residents' opportunity to come together as members of the community and to receive support from each other. Watching football gave them a sense of hope and normalcy that was missing from their lives.

We stayed for a while talking to residents and volunteers. My coworker would not leave, apparently driven to talk to every person there, trying to connect, to help. I could not understand why she could not see it was time to leave. Later, I understood that since this was to be her last contact with the people of the community, she felt that she had to do more. We finally returned at 2130 hours and I went to bed without dinner. I fell asleep before the lights went out and did not wake up until the morning.

IN THE TRENCHES

The next day, I arrived at headquarters not certain what to do next. My colleague had done her exit functions so I was now the seasoned worker — after only one day! What? I just started here yesterday. However, I did have more experience than the group of new people that were starting today. We also had a new supervisor so it was almost a case of the blind leading the blind. So much chaos and so little structure. I was paired with a new person who had arrived the night before. Where should I go? What roads would get me where I needed to be? Did I really know what I was doing? Before she left, I took a minute to talk with my colleague from the previous day. She reassured me I would make this experience into what I needed it to be, and I would be called to find the people that needed help.

So I decided to perform the same flooding experience that had been performed on me the previous day. It was amazing to see her reaction shift from being one of this does not look too bad to an overwhelming

feeling of loss. As I remained quiet, my colleague shed tears. I made certain to give her the time she needed to address her own feelings so she could do the work she needed to do.

We were fortunate to meet with an incredible woman in her 80s. As we drove up to her home, we could not help but notice the stately structure with an open arm staircase and large white pillars. In front of the house was a FEMA trailer surrounded by meticulously stacked items salvaged from her home. This amazing woman said her family had lived in this area for three generations. She had been baptized in a church that was rebuilt when Camille hit in 1969 and she emphatically stated she would help rebuild that church again. While she shared her story with us, she continued to work, diligently cleaning items with soap and water attempting to remove the damage of one terrible day from the remnants of what it had taken her family three lifetimes to build. She said her husband's family had lived in the house since 1902 and that she would rebuild. However, she was having trouble with her insurance, a story that we heard repeatedly. Her insurance company would cover storm and wind damage but would not cover flood damage or storm surge, which was estimated to have come in at 28 feet in some areas. She said that this storm was like none of the others she had lived through. In Camille, there were only about two inches of water. She showed us the line on her walls where the water level had come up from Katrina. It was on the second floor three quarters of the way up the wall. She refused our vanload of items except for a fruit drink. She was fine, she said, and could take care of herself. However, since her hands were chapped, she would like a box of surgical gloves. I told her we would return in a day or two to bring them to her.

Driving up and down the streets that were closest to the water there was such contrast between debris and open lots. I initially assumed that an open lot was one already cleared. We stopped to talk with a man in his 60s who was helping his mother find her personal belongings. Where was the house? As I looked around, I saw dirt and little else. He must have understood the confused look on my face and stated, "We haven't found much. Been looking up and down some of the streets but can't even find the clapboards to the house." I asked where it went. He turned around and pointed to the ocean. As the sun glimmered on the serene ocean, it was hard to believe that so many sins of the storm were under the now peaceful water.

He said that the rescue workers had found a woman's body over the weekend. She had been his mother's neighbor. The neighbor and her husband, both in their 70s and in poor health, decided to ride out the storm. Where their house had once stood was now just an open lot. The

husband's body had not been found. I could not understand why there had not been a mandatory evacuation. He stated, "They were born in this area, and died the way they wanted to die, at home."

Supplies

The need for supplies was immense. Consider replacing everything in your home with no place to buy needed items. When I arrived, for the first time since the hurricane, the weather was cold. People needed blankets. I soon learned that there were two types of blankets available: the itchy, warm, scratchy wool blankets that we used at the base, or the clean, crisp, soft, white cotton summer-weight blankets. Initially, I offered survivors a choice between the two. However, everyone selected the white ones. When the people picked up the white blanket, they would stroke it like a cat. Some even brought it up to their faces and gently rubbed it in on their cheek. There were few things left in the community that were soft and comforting. To save on space, I stopped requesting the wool blankets.

Work gloves were another hot commodity. Due to the nature of the clean up, holes were easily worn in the palms of gloves. However, the item that I had the greatest difficulty obtaining that was most useful was duct tape. I checked the warehouse daily for duct tape and it was never available. I did purchase it a few times at a gas station. I was also able to obtain it from other wise volunteers who understood the usefulness of duct tape. Since my bunkmate at the base worked to keep our lodgings clean and safe, he became a huge resource for other items. As volunteers were leaving, he would ask them if they had any supplies such as sleeping bags, unopened medical supplies, work gloves, pillows, and duct tape. These items were then distributed to those who needed them.

Water

We need water to survive. Therefore, it was important that water was available to drink. However, I noticed that there was no bottled water left for us to take to the residents. There was an abundant supply of canned water, but no one was taking it. I tried some of this water. It tasted like wet dirt. I spoke to a support person about the water to see if we could find some bottled water. I explained that it was much more sanitary to have a bottle with a cap that could close so the dirt could not get into it rather than a can that would stay open. She stated, "If they don't like our water, maybe they don't need our help." I was flabbergasted. If we would not drink it, why are we asking the residents of the community to take it? Rather than wasting my energy on this ethical dilemma, I purchased bottled water with my own money at a local gas station. After a week, we did

receive bottled water. Incidentally, in January 2006, I read in the paper that thousands of cans of water donated to the areas affected by Katrina were dumped.

Another Day, Another Newbie

For the next several days I was paired with a new mental health worker. Each day, I performed the same flooding experience. Reactions were similar. However, every person had a different breaking point. For one of my colleagues it was a visit outside of Gulfport to a man who had numerous medical problems. We had received a call from his neighbor indicating that he was not eating properly and was not taking caring of himself. The neighbor also warned us that he did not like people poking around in his business, so we should be careful. Instructions to his house consisted of turning right at the second large pine tree and a left around the pond. As we arrived, four of the dirtiest, matted-haired dogs I have ever seen greeted us. These friendly dogs led us down a path through the grass to their owner. When we got to the clearing, we saw several trailers and buildings that people lived in. There were several cars in different stages of working order scattered throughout the property. Ten people were outside drinking beer at 11 in the morning. We met up with him and talked with him for a while focusing on his dogs. He said he was fine but needed some dog food. We said we did not have any but gave him the name of a rescue mission for animals that might be able to help. We spoke to him about his physical health. He said he had a colostomy performed during Hurricane Rita. His thin body looked like it would blow over with a gust of wind but he appeared clean. Since he only had three teeth, we gave him some liquid protein drinks. His daughter, who also lived in this community, said we were the first people he did not try to run off. We gave her our number and told her to call if anyone needed anything.

On our way out, in the distance we saw several dump trucks unloading debris from the storm. This pile of trash went on as far as the eye could see. My colleague began to cry. She had never experienced people living in these conditions and understood this was the way they lived before the hurricane.

Disaster Junkies

Most of the people who volunteered were amazing. They had sacrificed so much to help. They also realized that they should do their time, usually three weeks, and then return home. Then it was someone else's opportunity to step up and help.

However, I discovered there was a group of people volunteering whom some referred to as *disaster junkies.* These are folks who go from disaster

to disaster offering their help. They seem to receive an incredible high from volunteering and an intense feeling of self-satisfaction. Working in an extreme situation for a long period can lead to a hypervigilant, almost trance-like state. Because of this high level of constant stress, some volunteers may become irritable and make mistakes, as their physical and mental resources start wearing. In the mean time, their loved ones from home may become less supportive of them for being gone for so long. As I learned, in disaster mental health work it is very important to know your limitations and take care of yourself and your own family.

Supporting Volunteers and Staff

One of the responsibilities of the mental health volunteers was to be on call at the base in the evenings and at night. For the staff to be able to identify us easily, we placed a bike flag at the end of our bunks. Even without the flag, many volunteers sought our support during their stay. However, others stayed to themselves. In an attempt to support those who were more isolated, I chose to eat each night with someone who was dining alone at the camp. I asked permission to sit with the person and then began a joining process. Each person had a different reason for being there. Some had been helped by other nonprofit organizations in the past and wanted to give support to those in need. Others were working for FEMA and needed the extra money. Some had just arrived, did not know anyone, and were overwhelmed with the situation. Whatever the case, by the end of the conversation there was much laughter and a sense of camaraderie.

Compassion Fatigue

There were numerous organizations that headed to the Katrina-ravaged areas of the south. These organizations, large and small, fulfilled many needs in the community. Therefore, one of our responsibilities was to check on the needs of the people volunteering. Most of these volunteers came to the area at their own expense. Therefore, they had limited resources and an incredible sense of frustration with the lack of progress from community and government organizations.

One such volunteer group was located in one of the poorest areas in Biloxi. The pastor who ran the center had been in Biloxi since the first week of the storm. I was informed that he was angry at the lack of support for this community and was challenged to see if there was any way we could work together to meet the needs of the people in this poor area.

Of course, I came with a vanload of supplies and was greeted with open arms. I sat down and spoke to the pastor about his concerns. His main concern was lack of resources for the residents and the volunteers.

However, also weighing heavily on his heart were the 17 unidentified bodies in a refrigerated trailer near the center. As he began to share the pain of knowing that there were people whose loved ones did not know how or where they were, I wept too. It was the first time I had wept in front of someone from outside of the Red Cross. Initially, I felt embarrassed about my tears but soon realized that if I had not been emotionally impacted by his story, I probably would not have been moved to volunteer in the first place. This incredible situation cried out for compassion and empathy. A memorial service would be occurring in a few weeks for those unidentified people, but much more was needed.

As I said my goodbyes, I told the pastor that I would return to the area with additional supplies for the residents. I asked him what else I could do when I returned home to help with his mission. He requested games for the volunteers and residents so that they could have some fun and a sense of normalcy in this chaos. I told him I would do what I could.

The Shooting

On my second to last day in the community, I was told that there was no one who would be able to go with me. Initially, I refused to go out on my own. However, those pains of doing everything I could before I left were overwhelmingly strong, so off I went. There had been a shooting in Biloxi and I was asked to check on the pastor who had been shot. Off I went, by myself, looking for the pastor with little regard to my own safety. I checked with several organizations before I found the group that had worked with the pastor. They informed me that the pastor was working on setting up electricity for his center and had been shot in the head in a drive by shooting. The pastor was lucky; it only grazed him and required some stitches. He was on his way home to recuperate but planned on returning. The volunteers indicated that there had been an increase in gang activity over the last few weeks trying to gain control over that area in the community. As they were telling me this story, I realized that I was the only female volunteer from the Red Cross in the area. I knew I had to get out of there immediately. I called headquarters to say I would be returning and what had happened. Security personnel were unaware of the shooting so I would need to meet with them when I got back. Once I hung up, I pulled over and began to cry. I had put my life in danger without considering the consequences. This event was a powerful reminder that I needed to focus on my safety and needs before I could focus on the needs of others.

TIME TO GO HOME

Last Day

During my last day, I completed my exit interview procedures and decided to head out into the community. I again hooked up with another newbie and performed the same flooding experience as I had before. However, this time the experience was different for me. I realized that this would be the last time I would be in this community for a long time. That pain of wanting to do more was still strong. However, I knew it was time to give someone else the opportunity to help and have the same life-changing experience.

I spent more time than usual with the flooding experience on that last day. The other volunteer wanted so desperately to stop when we saw people outside, but I just did not feel that it was the right place. We only had time to talk to one person. I finally pulled over when I saw a man in his late 50s outside working. I remembered visiting him at the beginning of my experience and had the feeling that there was something more that he needed. As we spoke to him, he asked if we would like to see his FEMA trailer. We both went inside and sat down. The conversation immediately turned to the amount of weight and responsibility he had. As the patriarch of a family of 11, he felt burdened with these responsibilities. Additionally, his mother had died three weeks after the storm and he was feeling the pain from her death. To cope, he was self-medicating with alcohol. Obviously, this was beyond the scope of what we could do. However, I remembered the psychiatrist that I had met up with who was taking clients. I was able to recall the psychiatrist's name but had misplaced his phone number. He stated that one of the first things he did after the storm was to order a new phone book. I found the number and he set up an appointment for an evaluation the following day. As we said our goodbyes, I knew it was time to go home.

Returning Home

During my final morning, I awakened early to take my last outdoor shower. I had an incredibly strange feeling of wanting to return home, but also needing to stay. As I was looking for a seat for breakfast, I chose to perform my last act as a volunteer. I had the opportunity to sit with a man in his 70s whose wife had died the previous year. This was his first experience as a volunteer. When I asked what drew him to do this, he indicated that his wife had been his whole life, both professionally and socially. Since her death, he said he had felt isolated. We talked for a while about his experience so far and ways he could continue making connections with others. As I left the table, I realized my work was finished.

As I gathered up my personal belongings, my bunkmate asked that I give up my bunk to another volunteer since it was sturdier. As I moved my stuff and the other volunteer settled herself into the space, I looked around at the sea of new faces and knew I had done all I could and now it was time to give someone else the opportunity to have this experience. I could not believe that I would actually miss this place, but I knew I would.

As the van drove off the base to the airport, I was overcome with conflicting emotions. I felt that I had done all I could, but wondered if I could have done more. Should I have stayed longer, or offered to return? No. Instead, I needed to take care of my own family and responsibilities. It was time to go home.

My husband and children were waiting for me at the airport when I arrived. As we embraced, I felt an incredible sense of peace. Peace that I hope all those affected by the hurricane would also feel one day.

AFTER THE EXPERIENCE

Now that I have been home for several months, my life has settled back into its old routines. Since that time I have coordinated a few opportunities for those in my community to help those affected by the hurricane. With the help of our church, we shipped 140 games to the center in Biloxi. My son's school had a fundraiser to raise money to purchase Santa hats for a Christmas play at one of the schools from the community. Each hat was paired with a supportive letter from a student. I have talked about my experience to several church and community organizations that are making plans to go to the Gulfport/Biloxi area to help.

I feel a great sense of honor to have had the opportunity to help those in Mississippi. As one resident stated, "I may not remember your name, but I will always remember your face and the help you gave me and my family." This is also true for me. I may not remember your name, but I will always remember your face and your story and how my life has changed because of your incredible spirit.