

BUILDING RESILIENCE BEING PREPARED



In early August 2018, a wildfire broke out about 40 kilometres from the northern B.C. village of Burns Lake. Within two weeks, Burns Lake was surrounded by wildfires on three sides, and evacuation orders were in place throughout most of the region of ranches, farmland, and First Nations Reserves.

“Many folks decided to stay behind and fight for their homes, but children had to leave,” says Linette Schut, RCC, mental health clinician at Carrier Sekani Family Services. “Some people evacuated to Prince George or

Smithers, but many stayed in town with friends and family. There were many animals that had to be evacuated as well, and volunteers set up a space for livestock at the fairgrounds, and a local kennel took many cats and dogs. One of the First Nations — the Burns Lake Band — opened up their hall to evacuees and, quickly, that became the hub in town. They served meals three times per day and had cots for people to sleep.”

Support came in from around the province, including Indigenous healers from Tsow-Tun Le Lum Society on Vancouver Island, support people

from First Nations Health Authority, and volunteers from the Disaster Psychosocial Services (DPS) Program. Almost every day for the next two weeks, Schut was at the hub, checking in with people and helping to stay organized.

In other words, she provided what was needed most during a disaster.

PROVIDING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Irene Champagne, RCC, has worked in the mental wellness field for over 35 years. Her initiation to post-disaster emotional support work came in the late 1980s.

HOW COMMUNITIES FACE DISASTER AND WHAT YOU CAN DO TO ASSIST

BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI



THE NORTHERN B.C. VILLAGE OF BURNS LAKE

JOHN CALOGHEROS

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Remember, the distress that emerges in the wake of a disaster is normal and healthy. Compassionately holding space for normal reactions to an abnormal event is often all that is required.

“Friends of mine — doctors — were serving as volunteers for a number of international aid organizations,” says Champagne. “I had studied CISM [critical incident stress management] and volunteered to provide debriefing for the members of the medical teams.”

Since those days, she has learned the distinct differences between CISM and post-disaster emotional support, along with many other lessons on how to support individuals and communities impacted by disasters.

“At first, just like the physicians I had debriefed, I found volunteering a bit overwhelming — I was tempted

to over-function as a therapist,” says Champagne. “But the past 30 years have proved that providing Psychological First Aid (PFA) — which is endorsed by the World Health Organization — is a wonderfully effective, destigmatizing, respectful, and empowering intervention in the wake of a disaster.”

Champagne’s volunteer work has taken her to Australasia, Central America, US, Far North, Europe, and numerous locations in Canada. In the early 90s, she recruited RCCs to volunteer in the wake of disasters on Vancouver Island, and when the DPS Program was established in 2001, she

served as a field team volunteer, a role she continues in, as well as a field team leader. Currently, she represents BCACC on the provincial DPS Council.

“The DPS Program provides support immediately after it is safe to respond, and if needed, we continue to support for the first couple weeks or as the need is assessed,” says Champagne. “The authorities in the community must request our help, and we assess the need as the recovery proceeds.”

The goal for DPS Program volunteers is to help stabilize community members, so they can make wise decisions about next steps.

WHAT HELPS?

As a DPS volunteer, Champagne works with groups, families, individuals, people waiting for financial support and in temporary shelters, seniors, adults, children, people with disabilities — as well as people who are helping in the recovery process. Local resources of mental health and spiritual support are vital in the recovery process, and she notes that the most important indicator for optimal recovery seems to be sources of comfort, compassion, connection, and confidence.

“Some communities and individuals can find this within themselves, while some need a social context for these supports,” says Champagne.

Sometimes the compassionate, comforting presence of a fellow human is enough.

“Remember, the distress that emerges in the wake of a disaster is normal and healthy,” she says. “Compassionately holding space for normal reactions to an abnormal event is often all that is required.”

The work of mental health practitioners becomes more important later in helping people who experience long-term effects.

“Disaster psychosocial work is often a tiny part of supporting people through the early stages,” she says, noting that when there are deaths, the recovery process takes a more painful turn. “Individuals with traumatic loss and/or additional complications benefit from counselling.”

But in the immediate situation, the direction from PFA is Look, Listen, and Link: Look for distress. Listen for what is needed. Link to the appropriate resource.

“Most beneficiaries of post-disaster emotional support are not seeking counselling — that could pathologize



Disaster Psychosocial Services Program

Developed under the Provincial Health Services Authority, the Disaster Psychosocial Services (DPS) Program provides psychosocial support to the public and responders affected by an emergency or disaster. Training opportunities to become DPS Program volunteers include two free online courses: **Introduction to Disaster Psychosocial Services**, a series of eight 30-minute modules, and **Introduction to Emergency Services**, through the Justice Institute of British Columbia.

the recovery process,” says Champagne. “They are seeking comfort, connection, and confidence. Our counselling training helps us to ‘Look’ and ‘Listen,’ but this work calls for Psychological First Aid — not counselling.”

Anyone with a will to be supportive can take PFA training.

“I am often moved by the deep presence and ‘pre-skill’ that emerges in my fellow volunteers,” says Champagne. “It is a willingness to be fully authentic and human(e), without bringing one’s skills as a counsellor or therapist to the fore.”

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES

When disaster does strike, there is no predictability. Champagne says every community and every disaster is different. Even when a similar disaster hits the same community more than once, it is impossible to predict the

psychosocial responses to the crisis.

“In communities where stability has been enjoyed and taken for granted, the catastrophic nature of disasters can be deeply shocking and paralyzing,” she says. “In communities where chronic chaos has been endured, the impact of a disaster can be depressing and numbing. There is no template or reliable predictor for how a community responds.”

However, it is troubling when communities and individuals underestimate psychosocial damage, or when people are encouraged to conceal distress, which can lead to serious consequences.

“If there is an attitude that outside help is not needed or people should ‘suck-it-up,’ we may see people who feel shamed for being victims of the disaster on top of feeling shame for being upset by it,” says Champagne.

“Many communities have strong social connections that are wonderfully helpful in supporting resilience, but it is troubling when impacted people — victims — are subtly or overtly shamed for experiencing psychosocial disturbances in the wake of a disaster.”

Because each individual responds differently, post-disaster emotional support workers are watching for diverse signs of distress, from being loud and angry to numb and dissociative.

“Delayed reactions are also common — a person might appear stable and ‘on the ball,’ pitching in with disaster relief in the early stages — then collapse,” says Champagne. “We watch for this among the workers.”

Volunteers also have to watch for reactions in themselves. When disaster occurs in our own communities, Champagne calls it “a double whammy” of our own reactions and the need to be a helper. Self-care and healthy self-awareness allow us to stay strong when needed.

“Know your limits. Seek and offer peer support. Stay humble — avoid over-functioning,” she says. “It is really important to be gentle with ourselves and each other.”

PREPARATION: THE KEY TO RESILIENCE

While disaster can’t be predicted, we can prepare to a certain extent.

“Frank and realistic acceptance of risk and preparation for disaster is most helpful, but we continue to encounter under-prepared folks,” says Champagne. “One direct consequence of volunteering with the DPS Program is regularly reviewing one’s insurance policy and assessing one’s own recovery strategy.”

While only experiencing disaster can really tell us what we need, we

can learn from other examples, such as Burns Lake. Wildfire is not the only disaster Burns Lake has experienced in recent years. On January 20, 2012, the Babine Lake Mill explosion killed two and injured 19, some severely. Lawsuits continued for years. The mill was rebuilt and re-opened in April 2014 with about half of the number of employees as previously.

Schut says the people of Burns Lake are incredibly resilient.

“Tragedies happen regularly — fatal car and farm accidents, wildfires, drug and alcohol overdoses, and accidents, I could go on — and everyone knows each other or has connections to each other, so when these things happen, it affects the whole community to some degree,” she says. “People have learned how to cope with a lot and have learned how to move on from tragedies. The

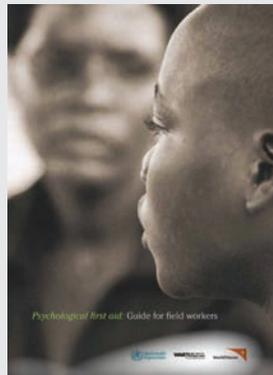
like ‘What are the chances it will happen again?’ or ‘We survived last year, and we’ll work through it again.’”

That community connection and support is a demonstration of resilience.

“Most people are incredibly resilient,” says Champagne. “The miracle of human strength and resilience is what I am most moved by — that and the wonderful experience of witnessing and participating in the humanitarian efforts with other fantastic people.”

Champagne continues to be student in disaster psychosocial response, noting that both the field experience and research findings are evolving and helping to build capacity and competency.

“The recent five years, with the terrible effects of climate change



Psychological First Aid

Psychological First Aid: A Guide for Field Workers (2011) is available for download in more than two dozen languages. It covers everything from preparation, communication, and respect for rights and culture to recognizing distress responses, helping people feel calm, and taking care of yourself in a disaster. Anyone can download this manual and get a handle on how to be better prepared and helpful in a disaster.

www.who.int/mental_health/publications/guide_field_workers/en/

community comes together to support each other in big ways.”

In early May, a wildfire broke out near Burns Lake, putting the community on edge. Schut says her Facebook feed lit up with people reacting and remembering the previous summer’s fires and evacuations. “Right now, it’s just facilitating positive conversations and looking on the bright side — anxiety-decreasing strategies,

spectacularly increasing the need, have pushed us to learn faster than ever before,” says Champagne. “Over the past decade, I have gained far more experience and developed an even stronger passion for the DPS Program.”

And as disasters continue around the world and here in B.C., having the skills and knowledge to provide responsible support may prove more valuable than you could ever imagine. ■