

Post-Katrina Aftermath and Helpful Interventions on the Mississippi Gulf Coast

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This article is a personal reflective account that describes the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the major university on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and surrounding communities. There is discussion of how a resident social work instructor constructed a multifaceted postdisaster response: coordinating, networking, and providing housing assistance and educational and clinical activities. Specific and practical educational, psycho-educational, and clinical interventions that proved most helpful are described. There also is discussion comparing postwar

adjustment with post-Katrina adjustment, the nexus between post-Katrina responses, the Iraq War, and national policy, and posttraumatic growth at both individual and community levels.

Keywords: Hurricane Katrina; Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi; stages of disaster recovery; FEMA; postdisaster psycho-education; postdisaster counseling; posttraumatic stress; posttraumatic growth; Iraq War; Vietnam War

This article offers a first-person perspective by a Mississippi Gulf Coast resident mental health professional and university faculty member who also is a Hurricane Katrina and Vietnam War survivor. In navigating the turbulent journey on the Gulf Coast that began on August 29, 2005, the author continues to be engaged in a series of postdisaster activities and interventions as both a survivor and provider. This descriptive account offers readers a series of practical and strategic social service, psychoeducational, and clinical intervention learning points that are grounded in the realities of immersion in post-Katrina life in a very devastated area of the Gulf Coast. Also, there is discussion of the commonality and interface of individual and political contextual experiences and reactions after the Vietnam War as compared with those following Hurricane Katrina and the concurrent deployment of our Armed Forces to Iraq. Finally, actual and potential posttraumatic growth at both a personal and community-wide level is described.

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Extent of Katrina's Destruction and Disruption

The University of Southern Mississippi–Gulf Coast (USM-GC) campus sits directly on the usually placid Mississippi Gulf Coast, about 100 yards from the gulf. The destruction from Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005, was particularly severe across all 12 communities on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The USM-GC campus is located in one of these 12 communities, Long Beach, and was heavily damaged by Hurricane Katrina winds and storm surge. There was severe damage to many of the buildings on campus, to include complete destruction of the small wooden-framed building that housed the School of Social Work. The damage was so severe that no functions could be continued on the campus, and 6 months later it is still unknown if the university will ever return to the campus. Furthermore, fully 30% of the university's 350 staff and faculty were displaced due to destruction or heavy damage to their residences and personal belongings.

Through the remarkable collective efforts of university staff and faculty, led by Associate Provost Patricia Joachim and Dr. Richard Hadden, a temporary campus location was established at a former hospital low-rise site located about 2 miles from the

campus. Classes began on October 10 on a modified summer-session-like schedule. About 65% of the students enrolled pre-Katrina followed through and attended classes, in spite of severe personal challenges and losses, and the spring 2006 enrollment rose to 75% of pre-Katrina levels. Illustrating the impact on students: 8 out of the 14 MSW students in our current cohort either were rendered homeless (6) and lost practically all of their possessions or their homes were severely damaged (2). Several MSW students lost their jobs, and almost every field placement agency was either severely impacted or closed down, requiring major modifications to field placement learning. In fact, four of the students took on new field placements midstream with disaster relief agencies who themselves were fraught with disorganization and overwhelmed resources.

The destruction to the surrounding southern Mississippi communities was massive:

- More than 235 confirmed deaths and 68 still missing as of December 7, 2005 (G. Pender, 2005b)
- 68,700 homes and businesses were destroyed, 65,000 sustained major damage, and 60% of the forests in the coastal communities were destroyed along with much of the shipping and fishing industry (Editor's Notebook, 2005a)
- The neighboring community of Pass Christian had 80% of its homes destroyed, four out of the five primary and secondary schools, and the town lost 100% of its sales tax revenue, as no gas stations or shops were reopened (Editor's Notebook, 2005b)
- There was 34 feet high storm-surge from Katrina in western Mississippi that was propelled inland as far as 10 miles from the coast through myriad rivers and bayous, severely damaging or destroying homes and communities that had never previously been flooded by storm surges. And damaging hurricane-level winds and tornadoes swept up through the central and north central areas of the state. (Walsh, 2006)
- An estimated 350 buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places were washed or blown away, along with most of the evidence of 300 years of Gulf Coast history. This makes Katrina the worst historic preservation disaster in our nation's history (Huffman, 2006)
- As of March 13, 2006, almost 100,000 Mississippians were living in FEMA trailers, and hundreds of other displaced residents are not eligible for FEMA trailers (Copeland, 2006)
- The two major east-west bridges on the Mississippi Gulf Coast that connect the three coastal counties together were totally destroyed. This has cut

off many resident from direct access to Harrison or Jackson Counties (and vice versa), resulting in substantially longer driving distances and related traffic congestion to circumvent the lack of water-crossings. Even a partial rebuilding of either bridge is projected to be 1 to 2 years away. The projected very long delays until both bridges are completed has been a regular source of controversy and disgruntlement, publicly played out in the local newspaper and on the television stations. One local coast resident reported that he had just been to the dentist and was told that he "had a Katrina mouth." He asked what a Katrina mouth was, and the dentist replied: "You need two bridges."

The time-lag for rebuilding destroyed homes and buildings is no laughing matter. It took more than a decade for the 28,000 homes in Florida wrecked in 1992 by Hurricane Andrew to be rebuilt; Mississippi alone has 4 times that number of homes to be rebuilt (Rubinkam, 2005). Besides the loss of lives, homes, and personal property, hundreds of thousands of Katrina survivors in Mississippi have been experiencing a profound sense of loss, grief, and malaise over the destruction of places of employment, small and large businesses, churches, schools, neighborhoods, recreational facilities, historic sites, and even entire communities—the loss of so much about life that was familiar and cherished along the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast (Scurfield, 2006a).

The Doubly-Disadvantaged: Low- and Moderate-Income Citizens Who Become Disaster Survivors

People who are already disadvantaged prior to Katrina, such as the poor and the near-poor, the sick and the elderly, find themselves disadvantaged even more in the face and wake of natural disasters. After my family had decided that we were not going to evacuate, we went to our church, St. Thomas, early in the morning of August 28, to pray in the adoration chapel. While there, we saw one other person, someone we knew whose wife was wheelchair bound. I asked him, "Are you going to evacuate or stay?" His reply still tugs at my heart: "We're staying. We have nowhere to go, and no money to get there with."

Yes, this double-disadvantage for many sectors of our society in the aftermath of disasters makes a successful postdisaster readjustment from a very difficult series of traumatic events even more complicated and difficult. In addition, Mississippi has one

of the highest taxes in the nation on food—a tax disproportionately hurtful to the less well-to-do. And a number of Mississippi politicians continue to be against reducing the food tax (Stallworth et al., 2006). Furthermore, the availability of affordable housing—always at a premium—has become almost nonexistent in the wake of Katrina’s destruction. Most of what was not destroyed is being used by disaster relief and reconstruction workers. And there has been a significant spike in rental rates for the few units that are available; indeed, there are reports of rental rate increases of up to over 200% from pre-Katrina rates (Copeland, 2006).

Personal Impact of Katrina

Unlike many of my colleagues and community residents, I was fortunate to still have a home that was habitable. Even a home with moderate damage inside and substantial outside damage paled in comparison to those who returned to find concrete slabs where homes and neighbors once were—and for many no flood insurance (since most homes were not in designated flood zones) to cover the loss from hurricane-driven storm surge. And the ongoing battles with the insurance companies as to what damage was caused by wind and rain versus storm-surge water are extremely contentious and complex; many homeowners have been left feeling that they are being ripped off by their insurance companies—with disastrous financial consequences.

My greatest personal loss was that my university office was totally destroyed. Thirty years of data, backup data stored on floppy discs, raw data collected over several years from two research projects, 1,000+ books, hundreds of videos and journals, artwork, and so on—all were swept away by Katrina. And it appears that neither personal nor university insurance will cover any of the loss.

My wife, Margaret, and my daughter, Helani, and I managed to find a circuitous route through several streets and yards where the debris was piled high and wide, to walk to the college campus 2 days after Katrina. I must admit that I was almost in a state of shock as we turned the corner and saw what was left of the School of Social Work building and my office: walls gone, almost all contents swept out into the street and intermixed with debris and contents from other buildings. I did find two file cabinets that were stuck in one corner of what was left of my former office. Even though the contents were completely water-logged and laced with storm-surge

muck, we decided that I ought to go through the files and take away whatever seemed most important—on the off chance that I would be able to actually salvage some of the contents later. We located two garbage cans that I dumped files into and found two battered office chairs to put the cans on to wheel them back through the debris and across the railroad tracks.

Lessons learned: Never, ever have your backup data on the same campus, let alone in the same building or in the same room, as your primary data. That doesn’t help when the campus is swept away. Also, many of us have become experts in some aspect of post-Katrina salvage work. I have become an expert at salvaging techniques to dry out files soggy with storm-surge muck. Here are a few tips about what I have learned. Dump the files into a garbage can with a lid and put it in the garage out of the sunlight; this allows the paper to remain damp until you have time to peel the pages apart, page-by-page and set them out in rows to dry in the sun—as long as the wind isn’t blowing. Only after about the fourth week of my several days a week routine of laying out yet another stack of wet papers to dry (I couldn’t do it every day, it was too depressing) did I discover, right before my eyes all along, the perfect anti-breeze strategy to keep the papers from blowing away—a common garden hose—heavy enough to keep a long line of papers from blowing away and narrow and light enough that the paper directly under the hose also would dry. I also found out that red pen notations are illegible when the paper has been immersed in storm-surge, blue-pen notations are hard to read, and black-pen notations are quite legible. And most amazingly, I discovered the untold wonder of yellow sticky notes throughout my files—they remained, remarkably resilient, stuck right to the pages where they had originally been placed months or years ago, and readable.

And the most important lesson was to find the humor in it all—or the loss would have been unbearable. The couch of my colleague, Patricia Davis, was sitting out in the street in the middle of the debris from several buildings. One of my most precious photographs is of me sitting on that couch, surrounded by debris, a small end table propped in front of me, and me studiously reading a remnant of something—and laughing. Or I would have been sobbing. . . . And yes, there are days when it still hurts. And I am one of the luckier ones; I know folks who lost both their offices or businesses and their homes.

Coordination of Emergency Housing Assistance

Because I still had my roof overhead, I was more available than many to take a lead role in offering to help with the reestablishment of the university as a functioning entity. In particular, if the university were to be able to get back on its feet reasonably quickly, something had to be done to help the 90+ faculty and staff who were homeless in the aftermath of Katrina. I volunteered to help coordinate and ended up taking a lead role to expedite emergency housing arrangements for university employees, with considerable assistance from Shelia White, director of university relations; Pat Smith, history professor; and Linda Skupien, public relations officer at our Gulf Coast Research Laboratory in Ocean Springs.

There was considerable daily activity required to compile and maintain updated information as to who was in need of housing, whether or not they had a site to put a trailer on, if the university would be able to make land available for some of our employees to put FEMA trailers on (after many roadblocks from federal agencies, this great idea was abandoned), having the Long Beach City mayor willing to designate our employees as "essential personnel" to hopefully expedite their receiving trailers, working with the Long Beach School District to have some of our employees placed in trailer sites along with their teachers, interfacing with numerous FEMA officials at several locations in the three coastal counties, and backdoor discussions with congressional and state officials to put pressure on the lagging federal response.

There was inordinate difficulty in being able to get accurate and updated information from FEMA officials. In fact, our entire set of trailer application packets for our employees was lost by FEMA and had to be resubmitted. And it seemed as if no one either knew or was willing to delineate the exact procedures for trailer applications, criteria for expedited processing, the status of the trailer requests, or who would get a trailer and when. One university staff member described a typical experience with FEMA:

My wife and I had been going to the nearest FEMA Disaster Recovery Center every week (for about 10 weeks consecutively) to check up on our trailer application. And we were repeatedly assured that our application was complete and was moving along. And then, when we heard from you last week about how FEMA had lost the trailer applications of university employees, I decided to call the national FEMA

telephone number to check with them that our application was complete and in process. But when I got through on the telephone, FEMA told me that they had no record that we had ever even submitted a trailer application!

Individual federal and other disaster relief employees and volunteers from national relief organizations typically were very friendly and well intentioned. Many have appreciated that which they did receive. However, the challenges of attempting to respond to such unprecedented (in the United States) numbers of storm survivors were immense, and many survivors found much to complain about, to include the labyrinth of bureaucracy to be navigated that was almost impenetrable and that the disaster relief resources were overwhelmed. No wonder that four of the more common acronyms for FEMA that supplanted "Federal Emergency Management Agency" were "Failure to Effectively Manage Anything," "Forget Ever Moving Ahead," "Federal Employees Missing in Action," and my personal favorite: "Fix Everything My A**" (Lee, 2005).*

And the almost impossible task that persisted for months in trying to get through on the telephone to overwhelmed telephonic response systems, particularly at FEMA and the Red Cross, was captured perfectly in the words of a Gulf Coast resident. He announced: "I found a number where the Red Cross finally answered the phone. It's 1-800-I AM BUSY" (Sound Off, 2005b).

Yes, if we didn't laugh at the extraordinary and unrelenting series of obstacles and roadblocks to receiving help, we would all have been crying incessantly or been enraged or totally numbed. Unfortunately, it appears that the disillusionment phase of postdisaster recovery has now arrived for increasing numbers of south Mississippi residents. We almost surely will be facing a markedly prolonged response in the face of the immense recovery tasks still ahead.

Postdisaster Counseling and Psycho-Educational Services

Our USM-GC campus is by far the smaller of the two campuses of the University of Southern Mississippi; the larger campus is in Hattiesburg, 75 miles to the

*The last acronym was provided by an attendee at my post-Katrina workshop at the annual meeting, MS Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, Jackson, MS, March 9, 2006.

north. One glaring longstanding lack at our campus has been the absence of any university student health or counseling services; our students have had to commute to Hattiesburg to avail themselves of such university-provided services. In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the necessity to have a counseling presence at our campus was an ethical and professional mandate—not only for our students but also for our faculty and staff (a constituency that is beyond the mission of most university-based student counseling services).

I have an expertise in posttraumatic stress disorder and postdisaster services. I served as an army social worker on a psychiatric team in Vietnam and had a 25-year career in PTSD program leadership positions with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) prior to my current faculty position. I am a resident faculty at the USM-GC campus. And I was a fellow survivor of Katrina along with my wife and daughter. Consequently, I was in a unique position to provide a counseling and consultation response that would be optimally accessible for our students, faculty, and staff. I offered, and the university accepted, my offer to provide counseling services.

I was given a university cell phone (a necessity in the absence of any working landline phones). Also, I was given an office to counsel in, a rare commodity in that there is so little available space in our temporary campus quarters for any faculty to have private offices. Finally, the School of Social Work gave me release time from a course that I was scheduled to teach at the Hattiesburg campus so that I could concentrate on my post-Katrina efforts at the USM-GC campus. From September 17 through May 5, 2006, I provided 72 counseling sessions to 12 faculty, 19 staff, and 14 students; 13 consultations (18 sessions) with faculty and staff; and 6 presentations/discussions in classes and at meetings with staff and faculty.

The Complementary Roles of Counselor, Emergency Housing Coordinator, and Faculty Member

The Hattiesburg campus counseling service might have been able to have a counselor commute to our campus only for part of one day a week on a scheduled basis, as they themselves were facing a 300% to 400% increase in student clients (many of whom were from the Gulf Coast). However, we clearly needed much more than that. I was able to make myself available on campus, Monday through Friday,

except when teaching my field seminar, and by cell phone at any time.

Also, through my coordination of housing assistance to staff and faculty, I was very visible and active daily throughout our temporary campus location, interacting with many employees about housing needs. As I had learned in coordinating disaster relief services on the island of Kauai in the aftermath of Hurricane Iniki, “The provision of goods and mediation with disaster agencies was the door through which mental health assessments and interventions could pass” (Scurfield et al., 1993, p. 47). In the course of such interactions, people would just start sharing their stories of the hurricane. In fact, it has continued to be almost a standard opening line that a person uses to greet someone not seen since the hurricane (or indeed strangers will do the same with each other, while standing in lines at the bank, grocery, and hardware stores, etc.) and ask, “How are you doing?” “How did you make out from the Hurricane?” “Do you still have your house?” And people will still spontaneously spend a few minutes, or longer, sharing their hurricane and posthurricane experiences with each other.

Over the ensuing months, I have continued to be involved in innumerable informal in-the-hallway conversations with faculty, staff, and students that have covered a wide range of topics. Inevitably, many folks will casually mention a personal difficulty they, a family member, friend, or neighbor have been experiencing. And we then, in effect, have an informal mini-counseling or consultation interaction without it ever necessarily being labeled as such. Such interactions have taken place outside the front entrance of our temporary campus building where people go to use their cell phones (because they can’t get clear telephonic connections in the back of the building) or are taking breaks; at the front counter inside the main entry; and along the hallways when passing by. Not infrequently, someone would drop by my office ostensibly to inquire about housing assistance or to check on their FEMA trailer application process, and there would be a mention of a personal difficulty, ranging from current temporary living arrangements, spousal disagreement arising out of what to do about their housing situation, or how an extended family member or friend is not doing very well. University colleagues at our Gulf Coast Research Laboratory have mentioned how this seems to be the way that the men they know are able to talk about the aftermath of Katrina. It is not through having an appointment

with a counselor. Rather, it occurs naturally when working on homes and trash removal, during breaks, through lots of small talk that actually becomes an avenue of expression and sharing among males who otherwise would see the same level of sharing in a counseling session as too touchy-feely.

Because of the concern of possibly being in an inappropriate “dual relationship” with fellow faculty or with students for whom I was their teacher, we have offered alternative counseling through the nearby Gulf Coast Mental Health Center or at the Hattiesburg campus. Also, because we were such a small campus, and our temporary campus location was so cramped for space and devoid of anonymity, there was a concern about adequate privacy and whether people would be willing to use my counseling services. Therefore, I decided that it would be a wise tactical move to advertise my counseling services within the rubric of my providing both housing assistance services and being the senior social work faculty member at this campus. I had signs posted throughout our campus building that said, “Housing Assistance, Social Work & Mental Health Counseling. Walk-In or Call Dr. Ray Scurfield at 228.234-2062.”

Thus, people sitting in my office might be there for any one of several reasons—not necessarily for personal counseling. Over the first 2 months of being identified as the counseling resource on campus, I had to shuttle from one temporary office to another until a more stable location was made available, even if the door had a doorknob hole but no doorknob (kind of like a peephole) and several copiers immediately outside of the room that many employees used. Now there is one copier 5 feet away, there is a doorknob, and I have a desk and file cabinet as well. I just brought in my one office picture and four battered plaques that survived Katrina to hang on the wall. Now it’s almost like a real office.

There has been a range of problems observed. One student had been suffering recurrent nightmares of drowning from his experience during the height of Katrina. Even though he could not swim, he dove down from a rooftop in rapidly rising waters three times to rescue an elderly couple marooned on their second floor, and helped them break through the roof and climb out on top. A Vietnam veteran with war-related PTSD was taken to a very crowded shelter 2 days after Katrina that happened to have a number of Vietnamese people present. He had a resurgence of Vietnam-related symptoms and left the shelter. Most of the counseling I have provided

has been for a myriad of problems associated with the post-Katrina aftermath and not the more narrowly defined acute posttraumatic symptoms arising out of a specific traumatic episode during and/or immediately following Hurricane Katrina. Such issues include the pervasive sense of loss of place of residence and possessions, the inability to concentrate, low energy and exhaustion, the stress of decreased academic performance, not having a place to study or the resources to study with, sudden loss of employment (the Mississippi Gulf Coast had up to a 20% unemployment rate for about 6 months post-Katrina), the day-to-day stress of too few businesses open and too many people trying to use the few that are open for business (with subsequently very long lines and delays everywhere), a marked loss of quality of life, having to deal with significant others who themselves are stressed out from the challenges of life post-Katrina, and confusion, anxiety, anger, and/or sadness over what is and might be happening to them and to our communities in the ensuing months and years.

Helpful Postdisaster Psycho-Educational Information and Resources

Several of my colleagues sent me helpful literature on postdisaster reactions and coping, along with additional information gleaned from the Web. These include

- National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD.org)
- *Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide* (National Child Traumatic Stress Network at NCTSN.org)
- “Tips for Helping Students Recovering from Traumatic Events” (ED.gov)
- *My Hurricane Story: A Guided Workbook for Children* (available free of charge through www.mercycorps.org)
- *There Was A Hurricane* (written and drawn by Sandy Appleby, Tri-City Mental Health Center, East Chicago, IN; 219.398.7050, who was a volunteer deployed with the Indiana Task Force Disaster Team)
- Colleagues Bruce Young at the NC-PTSD, Menlo Park, CA, and Judith Holland, Trauma Consultants, Honolulu, have been particularly generous of their time and expertise to send me postdisaster materials
- *Suicide Prevention resource*. I have found the *National Suicide Prevention Lifeline*, sponsored

