

CULTURAL IMPACT ON DISASTER RELIEF

Social work deals with the emotional impact of an emergency on individuals. Although it is known that people respond to stress in a fight or flight manner when they feel threatened, just how that response is exhibited can be influenced by many things – age, disability, educational level, financial resources and communication to name some of them. One area that has often been overlooked is the impact of culture on how a person reacts to an emergency and how this will influence his or her acceptance of disaster relief.

The objectives for this discussion are:

- Become aware of the cultural composition of NJ
- Define culture
- Identify at least 3 ways individuals within a given cultural group may respond during a disaster
- List at least 4 strategies to meet the needs of various cultures in order to provide disaster relief.

There are various reasons why culture is so important to health care providers in New Jersey. Although New Jersey is the 4th smallest state in the United States, it is the most densely populated state. It is also one of the most religiously and ethnically diverse states in the US. The 2006 US census has identified that about 43% of the almost 9 million people living in New Jersey are non-whites. That is almost 4 million people. These groups all come from various cultures. But, even among whites, there are different cultures and the way they deal with stress. For example, people living in rural areas react much differently to situations than urban dwellers – they tend to be much more self-reliant and less willing to accept outside help. New Jersey is also very diversified in its religious beliefs. We have the 2nd largest Jewish population by percentage in the United States and we have the 2nd largest Muslim (Islamic) population by percentage in the United States. These numbers illustrate how important it is to consider the significance of cultural influences during a disaster.

We can have all our NIMS and ICS strategies in place, but how people respond can put a monkey wrench into the works. For example, unrelated Muslim men and women do not interact together. What happens if you try to evacuate them to a shelter? Will they go? How will you ensure the privacy and respect for the modesty of the women? How will you accommodate the men's need to pray 5 times a day?

Before we go any further, let's define what we mean by culture. Culture is the learned and transmitted knowledge of values, beliefs and lifeways of a particular group that are generally transmitted intergenerationally and influence thinking, decisions and actions in patterned ways. For example, American Indians have a deep distrust of the American government because of past experiences with it. Do you think they would willingly evacuate their homes because the government told them to do so? Other examples of distrust of government authority would be:

- Blacks with their history of slavery
- Japanese Americans during WWII
- Holocaust Survivors
- Cambodian Genocides

However, when we talk about culture, we have to be careful not to stereotype. There are many variations within every culture. There are also other mitigating factors, such as how acclimated a person is to the American culture. Someone who is a 1st generation immigrant and came to the United States as an adult will respond quite differently from someone who came here as a child and is now an adult or someone who is a 2nd or 3rd generation individual. Also, just as we all have different personalities based on our experiences and genetics, so do all other people, no matter what cultural background they may have. However, there are certain commonalities within various cultures.

Some of the reasons why culture is so important in an emergency are:

- People prepare, respond and recover from disaster within the context of their culture. For example, some cultures are more emotional than others and their emotional displays may delay or impede disaster relief efforts by not being emotionally available to listen to or respond to instructions on what needs to be done. Other cultures have been victimized in the past and are used to fending for themselves so they may be resistant to outside help. Other cultures feel they should be able to take care of themselves and it is shameful to accept “charity”, which is what they view outside assistance as.
- Culture offers a protective system that is both comforting and reassuring. None of us likes sudden change – especially if it is negative. Having something familiar to rely on gives us a sense of having some control back. We feel a connection to others and know that they can understand how we feel and why we may act a certain way. The community’s degree of cohesion helps determine the level of social support available to survivors. In other words, a community that is disrupted will be able to provide less support than a cohesive community. . That is why, during an emergency, it is so important to get families and communities reunited as soon as possible
- Culture defines what we consider appropriate behavior and gives us a support system with others of a similar background. It helps us to have a sense of community and a shared vision for recovery within this community. We are not alone – others feel as we do and want the same things that we want. Community often is extremely important for racial and ethnic minority groups, and it may dramatically affect their ability to recover from disaster. For example, a racial or ethnic minority community may provide especially strong social support functions for its members, particularly when it is surrounded by a hostile society.
- But despite the strengths of culture, responses from some groups may make them more vulnerable than others. For example, new refugees from war-torn countries may not have the financial resources or communication proficiency to respond to a disaster. They may also have had so many other stressors in their lives that a new disaster will likely affect them more than others who have lived a relatively calm life. As a result of past or present experiences with racism and

discrimination, racial and ethnic minority groups may distrust offers of outside assistance at any time, even following a disaster. They may also be unfamiliar with the social and cultural mechanism of receiving assistance and remain outside the network of aid. Poverty disproportionately affects racial and ethnic minority groups. Social and economic inequality also leads to reduced access to resources. For example, disadvantaged persons usually live in the least desirable and most hazardous areas of a community and their homes may not be as sound as those in higher income areas. Lack of familiarity with sources of community support and lack of transportation are common barriers for many immigrants and unwillingness to disclose their immigration status is a major barrier.

To help during an emergency, Social Workers should be familiar with the types of individuals within their service area. Some of the information you should be aware of is:

- What cultural groups (ethnic, racial and religious) live in the community? You should become knowledgeable about formal and informal community institutions that can help meet diverse mental health needs.
- Where do they live and what are their special needs? For example, if they have to be relocated, do they have special dietary requirements?
- What are their values, beliefs and primary languages? Are there interpreters available to communicate? Do they believe that a disaster is the will of a supreme being and therefore they are being punished?
- Finally, who are the cultural brokers in the community? Who can you establish a relationship with who is respected by the community and who they will listen to so you can get their cooperation? Gather information from, and establish working relationships with, trusted organizations, service providers and cultural group leaders and gatekeepers.

All of these points are important if your assistance is to be culturally appropriate and acceptable to the people. You need to anticipate and identify solutions to cultural problems that may arise in the event of a disaster. Without doing this and getting the community's cooperation, all your emergency response efforts will be futile. One of the best ways to go about this is to establish community partnerships:

- You need to know what resources and supports would community and cultural/ethnic groups provide during or following a disaster.
- You need to know if the groups hold pre-existing mutual aid agreements with any state or county agencies.
- You need to identify the key informants/gatekeepers of the affected community.
- You need to find out if there is a directory of cultural resource groups, natural helpers, and community informants who have knowledge about diverse groups. If not, develop one.
- You need to involve the community partners in all phases of disaster preparedness, response and recovery operations.

When you are interacting with people of other cultures, it's important to keep several issues in mind so you don't offend them. Giger and Davidhizar's "transcultural assessment and intervention model" was developed to help in the provision of transcultural nursing care. It is currently being used by several other health & human services professions. The model identifies 5 issues that can affect the interactions of providers and service recipients. These issues have been adapted to apply to disaster crisis counseling and they illustrate the importance of acknowledging culture and of respecting diversity. A complete description of the model can be found in "Transcultural Nursing: Assessment and Intervention (Giger and Davidhizar, 1999"

- **Communication:** Both verbal and nonverbal communication can be barriers to providing effective disaster crisis counseling when survivors and workers are from different cultures. Since culture influences how people express their feelings, as well as what feelings are appropriate to express in a given situation, the inability to communicate can make both parties feel alienated and helpless.
- **Personal Space:** This is the area that immediately surrounds a person, including the objects within that space. Although special requirements may vary from person to person, they tend to be similar among people in a given cultural group. A person from one subculture may touch or move closer to another as a friendly gesture, whereas someone from a different culture might consider such behavior invasive. You must look for clues to a person's need for space. Such clues may include, for example, a person moving a chair back or a person stepping closer while talking to you.
- **Social Organization:** Beliefs, values and attitudes are learned and reinforced through social organizations such as family, kinships, tribes and political, economic and religious groups. Understanding these influences will enable you to more accurately assess a person's reaction to disaster.
- **Time:** An understanding of how people from different cultures view time can help avoid misunderstandings and miscommunication. In addition to having different interpretations of the overall concept of time, members of different cultures view "clock time" – that is, intervals and specific durations – differently. Social time may be measured in terms of dinner time, worship time, and harvest time. Time perceptions may be altered during a disaster. Crisis counselors, acting with a sense of urgency, may be tempted to set timeframes that are not meaningful or realistic to a survivor. The result may be frustration for both parties.
- **Environmental Control:** A belief that events occur because of some external factor – luck, chance, fate, will of God or the control of others – may affect the way that a person responds to disaster and the types of assistance needed. Survivors who feel that events and recovery are out of their control may be pessimistic regarding your assistance. In contrast, individuals who perceive that their own behavior can affect events may be more willing to act and accept your assistance. You need to understand beliefs related to environmental control because such beliefs will affect people's behaviors.

Some of the strategies you can use to meet the needs of various cultures are:

- Develop a profile of the area's cultural composition and update it periodically so you can become aware of their needs and vulnerabilities and identify problems

that can arise during an emergency and develop possible solutions to these problems before an emergency occurs.

- Form alliances with leaders within the community that are trusted so that if an emergency occurs and important information has to be given, the people will listen to the trusted leader. For example, in many cultures, the religious leader will be regarded as a trusted member of the community and people will accept what is being said by him or her.
- Try to have bilingual and bicultural staff if at all possible. People will be more comfortable with and, accepting of what is being offered by, people who have the same background as them and understand what is important to them.
- Emergency information should be given in the community's primary language – both written and verbal. Alliances should be made with local newspapers, radio and TV stations so that information will be disseminated in a manner that is understood by the community. Having messages relayed through the community's religious or community centers will also be more acceptable to the people. The language should be geared to the literacy level of the community – it should be as clear and simple as possible.
- Understand and accept the natural support networks that are important in the community. In many cultures, the family or kin group is essential in the lives of its people, especially in helping individuals overcome grief and trauma. Helping families and friends reunite is one way to ensure support and cooperation from them during a disaster. If this is not possible, having support groups for people of the same culture can be very beneficial.
- Knowing how different cultures exhibit help-seeking behaviors is important. In many cultures, people turn to family members, friends or cultural community leaders for help before reaching out to government and private-sector service systems. In most communities churches and other places of worship play a role similar to that of an extended family and they turn to them first for help. Some people may feel shame in accepting assistance from others, viewing it as welfare. Refugees and immigrants may be reluctant or afraid to seek help and information from service systems because of historical mistrust of them or because of fear of deportation. Therefore, building trusting relationships and rapport with them is important. Establishing relationships with the religious leaders in the community and having a group of volunteers from the community trained to do outreach are some ways to possibly overcome their resistance.
- You must ensure that services are accessible, appropriate and equitable. You need to take special care to exercise culturally competent practices. Culturally sensitive outreach techniques can help to ensure that services are accessible and appropriate to the community. You can do this by allowing time and energy to gain acceptance in the community, by determining the most appropriate way to introduce yourselves, by recognizing cultural variations in expression of emotions and the manifestation of psychological symptoms, and by knowing their views about accepting assistance.
- Finally, the way to know and understand the culture of the community is by having cultural competency training. This should be an on-going process so that you understand the community and they see that you are respectful of their

culture. This mutual acceptance and show of respect will go a long way towards their willingness to accept assistance in an emergency and allow your emergency response plan to be successful.

The following scenario can be used to practice the information covered in this paper. I suggest practicing using 3 different groups: African-Americans, Latinos/Hispanics and Muslims, but any cultural group can be used. Answer the questions about the scenario.

SCENARIO:

It has been raining heavily for several days and a dam upstream from the community where your group lives is threatening to break. Many of the residents are either homeless or illegal aliens. The community must be evacuated immediately. Answer the following questions:

- What should have been done prior to this situation during the emergency response planning?
- How will you communicate the need to evacuate?
- What special needs will the group have at the evacuation center?