

Disaster Preparedness 101: Part 1

Practical and Psychological Issues in Response Readiness for Mental Health Professionals

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Please note that the featured article is not the verbatim transcription of the author's presentation at the SDPA Conference on "Preparing for the Unthinkable: Mental Health Provider Roles in Disaster Recovery." The transcription has been edited for content, length, copy, and grammar for the purposes of this publication.

Why are you interested in reading this article on Disaster Preparation? Are you simply curious? Have you had a crisis or been in a disaster which has spurred you to become better prepared? Were you inspired by watching recent media accounts of disasters in the news? Are you no longer in denial about the necessity for preparation? Whatever your reason, I thank you for taking the time to read this article and becoming more informed.

If you are not as ready as you would like to be, know that you are not alone. Data from FEMA shows that 60% of people have not practiced how to respond in a disaster at home or work in the past year. Just 39% of families have a disaster/escape plan in place. These numbers have not changed since 2007, even though 80% of people live in areas that experience extreme weather events. Why don't more people prepare for disasters?

Research data suggest that 25% of survey respondents under-prepare or do not prepare at all because of poverty and lack of information. It is hard to think far ahead if you do not understand what could happen or are just trying to survive on a day-to-day basis. Others report a belief that terrorism, disease outbreaks and hazardous materials, (commonly, HAZMAT) incidents are unlikely to occur, so no preparation is necessary. As with many other behavioral domains, self-efficacy is predictive of preparation for most types of disaster. For natural disasters, self-efficacy and a belief that *preparation will help one survive* the most severe disasters are predictors of preparation. Individuals who engage in planning and training for disaster preparation at work and school are more likely to prepare, whereas caregivers as a group are the most likely to prepare household disaster plans. People aged 18-34 years and older than 75 years, and those living in poverty are the least likely to prepare.

Besides simply not having sufficient resources or not knowing what to do exactly, the disaster preparation and planning process is fraught with thinking errors. Our minds often misfire into maladaptive thinking, especially under pressure. Some examples of common disaster-related thinking errors are:

- Normalcy Bias: “Everything will be fine.”
- Magical Thinking: “I’ll jinx it if I prep.”
- External Locus of Control: “The government will rescue us.”
- Perception of Inadequate Resources: “I don’t have enough money or space to prepare.”
- Inaccurate predictions of the future: “It won’t happen here.”
- Short Memories: “Let’s build condos here (landfill where Katrina hit).”
- Misconceptions about disasters: “Water is the greatest danger in a hurricane.”
- Differences in perceptions of natural vs. manmade disasters: “I can’t control nature, so I’ll accept whatever the weather does.” (Paul Slovic, *et. al*)

Overall, denial is our most powerful defense, and this thinking error is the biggest hindrance to adequate disaster preparedness.

There is also a conflict between facts and intuition in coping with the inevitability of a disaster. Social-Cognitive scientists have studied population norms and determined several factors which may be at play. Thinking biases (arising from our tendency to commune with like-minded people) can affect group norms and behavior, working in both positive and negative directions for disaster preparation, depending on what our close associates are doing (Meyer). Individuals vary in their risk perception, in terms of how much threat they perceive in the future vs. the present, which determines behavioral choices including how much we prioritize preparation (Repeik).

In research on denial (Gorman), the role of “confirmation bias” is notable, which means that testimonials and stories we hear or read about disasters may be compelling in confirming danger and the value of preparation measures. This is necessary to counteract the false belief that risk is nonexistent or minimal. Unfortunately, much of the population does not understand probability very well, a phenomenon referred to as “temporal parochialism” (Schulz), and this hampers disaster preparedness motivation.

Understanding these cognitive barriers can guide intervention efforts to counteract them and motivate better disaster preparation. For example, PSAs to increase public awareness and basic education provided by the Red Cross and FEMA increase readiness. Community institutions such as schools, worksites, public facilities, and organizations may offer more in-depth disaster response training. The United States federal government offers annual Prepare-a-Thons to coordinate community efforts across the nation. More informally, the sharing of stories among people is another way to raise awareness and impart information.

The best time to conduct disaster preparedness training is when people are open to novelty, and not too tired or anxious, which may interfere with learning. Individuals may elect to write about different points of view, such as why to prepare or why not to prepare, in order to explore their beliefs and expectations.

In San Diego, potential natural disasters include earthquake, fire, flash food, mudslides, tsunami, terrorist attack, gun violence, and chemical toxicity or even chemical warfare. To summarize, obtaining the facts and figures regarding local types of common disasters and what to do to prepare and respond is the first step toward preparedness. Earthquake and fire drills help familiarize people to the procedures and processes involved and to troubleshoot potential barriers. These drills also help determine escape routes in case of an emergency so that one can act quickly when the need arises. When anxiety and panic increase, it is very difficult to make good decisions and to think through everything that may be needed. Having a written or well-rehearsed plan, and following that plan can increase the odds of a good outcome.

Other practical steps for disaster readiness include preparing basic and necessary supplies, always keeping a full tank of gas in your car, a water bottle handy, and extra cash in your wallet. (These steps are detailed below.) Maintain safety measures in your vehicle, including flashlights, hazard markers, and first aid kit. Driving apps, such as *Gas Buddy* (that lets you know where the nearest station is) and *Waze* (that has the most current, GPS based road information, including alternate routes) may be useful to have loaded on your mobile phone. At home, it is important to regularly check your home appliances and smoke alarms, and maintain safety measures. Once you are well informed, then reach out and educate others in the family and workplace about good disaster preparedness strategies.

Please refer to the educational and coping Resources for Disaster Preparedness compiled by the SDPA Disaster Psychology Committee for further information.

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