Helping Those Who Learn to Help:
Addressing Stress during a Community Disaster

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Abstract: This article discusses lessons learned from working with social work students in the context of the encounter with Hurricane Sandy that hit the Caribbean and the East Coast of the US in late October 2012, and that can be defined as a community disaster. The literature documents the multifaceted impact of such disasters, and the special challenges faced by students in the helping professions who must cope with community disaster on both professional and personal levels. As social work educators, the authors have found ways to help their students process their reactions to, and cope with aftermath experiences. This article, rather than presenting an analysis of empirical data, describes strategies the authors have used to help students cope with the devastation caused by Sandy, students' responses to these strategies and suggested next steps.

Keywords: Community disaster, post disaster stress, coping strategies, training social work students, traumatic stress in health providers

This article discusses lessons learned from working with social work students in the context of the encounter with Hurricane Sandy that hit the Caribbean and the East Coast of the United States in late October 2012, devastating communities in Haiti, Jamaica, and Porto Rico as well as along the shores of New Jersey lower Manhattan and Long Island, New York. Sandy was a community disaster, also conceptualized as a collective disaster. In this situation a large group of people who share geographical or another characteristic such as religious or ethnic background are exposed to a stressful event (Berger, 2015). The concept has been used to describe situations human-made situations such as war or failure of a nuclear plant, as well as caused by natural forces such as a tsunami, an earthquake, or a hurricane.

Social, financial, health, and mental health effects of exposure to such events have been extensively discussed (MacFarlane & Van Hooff, 2009; Norris et. al., 2002). Reactions may appear immediately following the exposure or be delayed (Bonanno & Mancini, 2008). It has also been recognized that the impact of such exposure and coping with it depend on contextual and personal factors. Contextual factors include cause (nature or human made; developmental or circumstantial), magnitude, proximity, and duration (one-time, repetitive, or chronic) of the event, controllability, and degree of actual damages and losses. In addition, availability of instrumental (i.e., provision of advice, referral, services such as help in care giving), informational (such as advice about relevant issues) and emotional support, leadership, cultural context and community

response also shape the effects of the event. Thus, human made, proximate, repetitive, on-going and uncontrollable stressors, especially when support is limited, lead to more severe outcomes (Berger, 2015). Personal characteristics include gender, age, previous exposure to stressor events, a sense of mastery, competence and self efficacy, degree of optimism, differentiation of self, religiosity, interpersonal trust and hostility, such that women, young people and those who experienced previous traumatic exposure are more vulnerable (Gabert-Quillen, Fallon & Delahanty, 2011; Galea et. al., 2002; Lechner, Antoni & Carver, 2006; Neria, Nandi & Galea, 2008).

Studies reported on the effects of trauma exposure on students (Hawdon & Ryan, 2012) and on helping professionals in general and social workers in particular (Arvay 2001; Bride, 2007; Cornille & Woodard Meyers, 1999; Meldrum, King & Spooner, 2002). For example, mental health professionals engaged in direct practice were highly likely to be secondarily exposed to traumatic events through their work with traumatized populations and develop symptoms that were similar to those of direct survivors (Arvay, 2001; Bride, 2007). Social work students are a unique group within the communities of the helping professions and of the student body. Like seasoned social workers, they are caught between their personal exposure to the devastation and the demand to help their clients; however, they have not yet acquired the knowledge and skills that more experienced workers have access to for addressing this challenge (Badger & MacNeil, 1998; Huber, 1999).

However, with a few exceptions (e.g. Baum & Ramon, 2010; Marlowe & Adamson, 2011; Tosone et. al., 2003), literature about preparing social work students to address trauma related content is limited. Lemieux and her colleagues (2010) found that, following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, social work students experienced numerous stress reactions. Almost a half scored at or above the clinical level for depression, 6% showed clinical Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)-like symptoms and 16.9% reported consequent substance use, which might be seen as an effort to self-medicate. The authors concluded that it was critical to closely assess students' reactions, inform them about on-going self assessment, and provide them with psycho-education, information, and supportive supervision to address disaster-related issues and maximize resilience. Baum (2004) found that social work students who experienced terror related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reported feeling torn between their personal and professional needs, having doubts about their professional competence and difficulties performing fieldwork under the stressful conditions. Finally, Boyer (2008) reflected on the effects that being a social work student in New Orleans when it was hit by hurricane Katrina had on the development of her professional identity.

Both authors of the current article are social work educators in schools located on Long Island, NY, an area that was severely devastated by the storm. Homes were flooded or sustained other damage, and 95% of the island experienced power outage, leaving the residents without electricity, heat, hot water, or communication means. Four days after the storm hit long Island, some communities regained power while others remained disconnected for another week or two. As the majority of our students live on Long Island, they were affected to various degrees both directly and indirectly.

Consequently, as social work educators, we found ourselves facing students struggling simultaneously with their personal experiences and those related to their being evolving professionals, with heightened anxieties about their own families, their school work, and their clients (in internship or paid jobs). We thus had to find supportive and constructive ways to help them process reactions to, and cope with, this diverse plethora of aftermath stress. The unanticipated and evolving nature of the situation dictated the flexible nature of our responses and activities. While we did not follow any particular model and reacted to events and needs as they occurred and materialized, our actions were informed by principles of crisis intervention as described below. While some may view our activities as crossing boundaries between the educational and clinical spheres, it is common in social work education to address personal aspects of students' situation as they may affect what students "bring to the table" and how their issues are manifested in their practice with clients.

This article describes the issues we have identified and the strategies we have developed. It includes four parts. First, we provide description of who the students are, while remaining cognizant of the need to de-identify individual reactions as per IRB guidelines. It is important to note that at the time we were focusing on providing help to the students rather than on collecting data systematically. Therefore, we did not seek permission from students to quote them and thus could only include limited direct narratives where students later granted us permission to do so. As a result, this article is written utilizing what Kanary (2012) describes as "expository style" (p. 5). Second, we discuss the strategies we have used to help students cope with the devastation caused by Sandy. Third, we present a summary of students' responses to these strategies, and where permission was given, share specific individual reactions. Finally, conclusions and next steps are offered.

The Students

The literature (Berger, 2015) emphasizes the importance of personal characteristics that may impact the reaction to traumatic exposure. Because this report is anecdotal rather than a product of an empirical research, we do not have access to systematic information about students; however, we can present some general characteristics of the students while protecting their privacy as per IRB guidelines. This report is based on the interaction with 96 students. Sixteen were BSW students, 28 foundation year MSW, 44 advanced year MSW and eight doctorate students. They varied in age (early 20's to 60's), phase in the educational process, personal and professional experiences, and storm-related professional responsibilities. They also met various degrees of challenges. The gamete of negative effects on students

ranged from losing power and internet access, interfering with their ability to do school work, absence of public transportation and gas to allow getting to classes when these finally resumed after a week, the loss of possessions, destruction of cars, being evacuated, having to leave their homes to live with friends or relatives, and in some cases losing their homes and cars. Some students were living in areas where looting and breaking into homes were abundant; many had children at home as schools were closed, as well as elderly and sick parents or other relatives who were in desperate need for care.

The Strategies We Used

While we did not follow the model of crisis management per se, our strategies were informed by our familiarity with its principles and components that are common in diverse models in different combinations and variations (Berger, 2015). These strategies can be conceptualized along two dimensions: (1) a stage-based approach, and (2) differential types of help. The two were interlinked in that the initial strategies focused on addressing diverse immediate needs that students expressed, whereas second-tier communication and/or strategies focused on helping students to resume their school-related work. Below we describe the nature and process of implementing and executing help to students.

Initial Reach Out

In crisis situations, rapport is a major vehicle for help (Roberts, 2002). As we already were about half way into the semester and rapport and relationships with the students were established, our efforts of reaching out focused on ascertaining everybody's circumstances. Instantly after the storm passed the region, we began reaching out to all students enrolled in our classes by utilizing the e-mail tool of the learning management systems (LMS) utilized at the respective universities for all courses. We sent collective e-mails to all students letting them know that we were thinking of them, inquiring after their safety and inviting them to respond back to the group or privately to the instructor. We encouraged them to share, to the degree that they felt comfortable, challenges related to power loss, possible damage to homes and property and staying location in the aftermath of the storm. We also

asked whether they were in need of any help that the faculty member could provide. One of us who lives on Long Island also took the opportunity to assure the students that she was safe and would continue to communicate via e-mail on a regular basis.

Being aware that many students may have lost power, we suggested that they contact their classmates by mobile phones (landlines were not working) and any other means, and advise those who could not respond about our availability. As students began responding to these initial e-mails, we replied to each student individually and promptly, tailoring the response to the issues raised by each. One of us made an extensive effort to identify contact information of students who did not respond to the collective e-mail and texted or called them. While the universities started to organize collective reaching out to students, we felt that an individualized reaching out by a teacher with whom students had a connection was of special importance to enhance feeling supported.

Providing Support via Technology

Subsequent strategies were informed by the emerging needs of students as they responded to the initial reaching out and included encouragement, instrumental support, psycho-education about typical responses and effective ways of coping (e.g. limited TV watching, for those who had access to TV) and information about support services available in the community.

Encouragement

As reports about the devastation in the region became available, we were seeking means for students to share and process their experiences and reactions to the storm and its effects. One of us established informal discussion forums on the LMS for her classes, inviting students to communicate. The instructor monitored the discussion forum several times daily and posted responses to each student right away. Because the discussion forum on LMS is public, the instructors invited students who wished to share confidentially to reach out via the individual e-mail tool of the LMS or mobile phone, to which we responded promptly. Thus, our interventions at this stage were informed by students' needs as they were expressed in the various posting on the LMS or e-mails as described in the following section of the

article. This included validation of expressions of frustration or in contrast, feeling of gratitude for surviving, efforts to calm students' worries regarding their ability to submit assignments in a timely manner and meet course expectations, and reassurance that we would work with each student to develop a study plan that was suitable to her or his circumstances. Our communication also expressed appreciation and encouragement of students who shared stories about their volunteering experiences in their respective communities, and information about available resources, particularly support and counseling services (mostly in response to personal e-mails).

Instrumental Support

This type of support focused on imparting information regarding school closure, class schedule, and changes in due-dates of assignments. Although much of this information was available to students via the universities' web sites, the instructors' e-mails were meant to personalize the university-wide messages and help students feel less anonymous. One of us followed this up with more formal documents detailing the syllabi changes for each course. These documents were e-mailed to each student, and were also posted on the course LMS. The other instructor followed up with frequent updates as the situation continually changed, including information regarding closing of the university, changes in location of classes when school resumed, and opportunities for volunteering activities organized by the school.

In Class Processing

Consistent with findings that face to face interaction increases the sense of support for survivors of traumatic exposure (Hawdon & Ryan, 2012), one of us had the opportunity to augment the electronic communication with in-class discussion a few days after the hurricane. Each of the classes opened with checking in with students where they were, the effects of the storm on their lives, their families and their communities. Time for discussion was unlimited and students were encouraged to express as much (or as little) as they wished. Cognizant of the potential for vicarious traumatization by listening to stories about other students' experiences, the discussion was led in a supportive invitational

style, affording a voice for those who wanted to share and respecting those who did not. Students were also invited to comment on how they felt listening to their classmates' stories.

Students' Responses

Students' responses varied. Some did not respond at all whereas others responded overwhelmingly, including some of those who were extremely affected by the storm. Thus, a number of students who reported the most devastating stressors (two who lost their homes and other who were forced to evacuate to shelters) resourcefully managed to be in touch against all odds by developing creative strategies for communication and manifesting how important it was for them to be connected.

Students' responses revealed their appreciation and gratitude for the strategies employed by faculty and included mostly two types. One was narrative responses, where students basically related their stories without explicitly asking for advice or help beyond the opportunity to share. The second type of response was information-seeking, where students were asking for specific details about course material, and more seldom, about resources to help them cope with their distress.

Students' Responses to Initial E-Mail

Responses to initial e-mails included appreciation, emotional sharing, and information seeking. Overall, students were very appreciative of the faculty's reaching out to them. They thanked the instructors for their care and concern, and often extended good wishes to them and their families' welfare, displaying a sense of mutual regard. Some said that this was the first post-storm e-mail that reached them and it made them feel a bit better that somebody cared. One student wrote that it was hard to believe that in the middle of all the chaos, the instructor found the time to reach out to students and how meaningful it was. Those who shared their feelings expressed mostly worries, fear, concerns being emotionally distraught and full of anxiety; however, the dominant tone was self contained and revealed that students tried to gain some perspective. Some pointed out that despite the inconvenience of power loss they were happy that they were not physically hurt. Information seeking responses inquired about course schedule and

assignments due-dates. A review of these e-mails indicated that many were sent from students' personal e-mails, suggesting that they were accessing their university-generated e-mail addresses only to a limited degree. Thus, it is possible that many students have missed some of the initial e-mails sent by the faculty and were initiating contact with the faculty on their own accord, possibly demonstrating the need to connect in times of stress.

Students' Responses to Discussion Forum

Students displayed a differential pattern of response to the LMS discussion forum. Out of the three courses in which this forum was offered, students availed themselves of the opportunity in only one course, where weekly posts were part of the pre-storm routine assignments. Possibly, the culture of communication via this tool was already embedded within this cohort, although the e-mail introducing this forum clearly stated that these were voluntary and informal threads, not associated with the course curriculum. Students' responses whether on the discussion board or in emails to the faculty members shared narratives of the storm's impact, personal challenges and emotional reactions, volunteerism, and socio-political aspects.

Narratives of the Storm's Impact

Students described the magnitude of the storm's impact in their respective communities: homes flooded or burned, neighborhood destroyed, people displaced. This theme was common to all the posts, suggesting that students needed an opportunity to share their trauma narratives

Challenges and Emotional Reactions

Students described personal challenges they experienced and coping with damage to their homes or/and loss of property. Others wrote about the challenge of managing family members with special needs in the absence of electricity, heat or cooking facilities. Many described their feelings during the storm and their emotional reactions to its impact. These ranged from annoyance, describing the storm's aftermath as a "nuisance" and "inconvenience", to emotional distress. Students wrote about being scared during the power outage

and their sense of dismay, using expressions such as "hard to conceptualize," and "humbled" when they described the destruction in the aftermath of the storm. At the same time, many students also expressed gratitude that they survived, saying that they felt lucky, grateful or blessed to be alive. Students also compared their experiences and losses with those of others who were less fortunate, and expressed awareness of their own fragility. They compared their state of crisis with that of clients they helped, and reflected on the challenge of being a social worker and a person in need at the same time. Others wrote about gaining insight into the needs of their own agency's staff who were experiencing stress and privation even as they were involved in providing food and supplies to clients in the community. Students also noted that the main message derived from the storm was that it served as a "great equalizer."

Volunteerism

Several students described actions they took to help others in their communities. These ranged from volunteering in shelters or churches located in communities that experienced serious flooding and home destructions, to preparing care packages for displaced persons, to hosting friends and families in their homes once they regained power. Some students wrote about the importance of helping others and about the satisfaction they have derived from it. Others, however, discussed the stress involved in hosting relatives and strangers in their homes.

Socio-political Context

One student discussed the storm in the context of the presidential elections. The student noted the importance of voting in these elections, especially in light of the candidates' different opinions about the role and status of the federal Emergency Management Agency (government vs. private agency).

Responses to In-Class Discussion

The high rate of class attendance immediately following the storm suggested that students felt the need to be together and struggled to get back on track in spite of persisting difficult situations. Reactions to the discussion were initially emotional, gradually focusing on the challenges followed by a more practical and action-focused direction. Like responses

to on-line forums described above, in-class reactions included sharing of storm-related narratives, emotional reactions to the storm and its aftermath and personal challenges, whereas volunteerism and the socio-political context were not. One possible explanation may be that the class discussion took place a few days after the storm when information about the scope of the damage was emerging, and many were still in initial shock and disbelief, which was characterized by one student's statement "I am learning the positive effects of dissociation." One student shared that following the report about damage to a neighborhood and a church, a classmate mobilized recruitment of donations and showed up at the site with a car packed with food and clothes. This may indicate that as time passed, students were more able to initiate and participate in recovery activities.

Storm-related Narratives

Students provided descriptions of what happened to them, their families, neighbors, friends, and communities. Reports regarding damage done to their own homes, evacuation and hosting others were abundant. Stories varied in degrees of detail and reported impacts. Some related to their direct personal experience and others to effects that they experienced indirectly such as family members who were forced to seek refuge with relatives.

Emotional Reactions and Challenges

Students expressed great appreciation for the opportunity to tell their stories and to be heard. They stated that sharing in class and hearing other peoples' stories helped them to process their own experiences. Some of the content was painful and evoked considerable emotional reactions, to which other students were able to respond by comforting, displaying empathy, and offering support. Where indicated, the instructors (both of whom are licensed mental health providers) met with students in private and offered referrals. A typical statement by many was that the hurricane and related issues threw students off in terms of their school work and while they were struggling to get back on track, they found it difficult to do so. Several students shared their delight at the opportunity to become closer with family members with whom they were forced to co-habit, whereas others felt stressed by the need to

share crowded quarters for prolonged periods of time. Some expressed feeling guilty for this reaction.

The discussion gradually shifted to sharing stories of challenges. A major topic was the shortage of gas, which was a serious problem because of lack of effective public transportation in the area. Most gas stations ran out of gas and where it was available, lines were long and fights frequent. Some students reported waiting on line for six or seven hours, only to encounter a "no more gas" sign and pumps wrapped by yellow ribbons. Some expressed anger about incidents when first responders abused their eligibility for priority in getting gas intended to allow them to fulfill their duties, to fill their families' and friends' cars. Others offered practical advice such as addresses of helpful (and not so helpful) web sites, strategies to approach FEMA, and locations where gas was more easily available.

Some students discussed what they learned about social workers' role and interventions in time of crisis from the modeling by the faculty. However, there were differences between MSW and doctorate students, as the latter serve in supervisory and administrative positions and thus experienced responses of workers and staff in their agencies. One doctorate student (who gave permission to share the following) thanked the faculty "for encouraging me to hold a discussion with my staff. The results were very enlightening." The student reported that after a staff discussion inspired by the conversation in class, one worker privately reported relapsing in light of the stress; another shared that she had no food available at home for a week, even while distributing food to others. The doctorate student, who was their director, referred the former to an emergency counseling and encouraged the latter to take food bags home. The student-director concluded "I am amazed; I just assumed that they would have asked for food if they needed."

Delayed Responses

A few weeks after the storm, several students started to manifest delayed responses, communicated in class or to the instructor in person or via e-mail. Students expressed anxiety and feeling "exhausted" and "drained," complained about inability to concentrate, comprehend readings and complete written assignments, and sometimes became agitated in class,

and displayed fatigue, all of which suggested stress reactions. Sometimes, these reactions were accompanied by shame and survivors' guilt such as a self identified disproportionate grave reaction to a perceived minimal inconvenience caused by a brief loss of power and internet access. When such responses occurred, the instructors met with students privately to collaboratively develop individualized plans for completing course requirements as well as provide referrals when indicated.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Consistent with previous literature about the response to crisis exhibited by social work students (Lemieux et al., 2010), students described in this article reported a myriad of stress reactions to Hurricane Sandy. Similar to findings by Badger and MacNeil (1998), and Huber (1999), our students reflected on the relationship between their own stressful experiences and those of their clients. In agreement with the literature that the availability of support has the potential to ameliorate negative impact of traumatic stress (Berger, 2015), students' responses also revealed their positive reactions to the strategies employed by their instructors. Our experiences with our students, as described here, suggest that, in time of crisis, there is room for effective strategies in the non-clinical environment of the classroom. In fact, it seems that the instructor, because of on-going rapport with the students, is in a prime position to offer initial support and guidance to students as well as modeling effective behaviors at the time of community crisis, inventing new uses for communication strategies usually reserved for pedagogical use.

This report's unique strength lies in the fact that it describes information that has been gathered in real time, thus validly reflecting the students' experiences, as opposed to experiences that are reported after a time lapse and may be colored by distant reminiscence and later coping strategies. Further, this report reflects the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, educational levels as well as various degrees of proximity and direct exposure to the traumatic event.

Some suggestions can be offered on the basis of our experience. Similar to literature about helping clients (Roberts, 2002), students' response patterns

suggested that they too benefitted from reaching out to them as soon as possible and by as many means as possible. It is useful to adopt a stage -based approach beginning with initial reach out and support, followed by addressing the differential needs of students (encouragement, instrumental support and psycho-education) as they cope with diverse stressors and on-going follow-up even as the circumstances normalize. Moreover, encouraging students to remain in touch with each other (e.g., establishing their own discussion threads) even in the aftermath of the crisis can be helpful in providing continuity of peer support.

Consistent with the literature, (Hawdon and Ryan, 2012), face to face communication is recommended when possible. Furthermore, receiving a message that their teachers cared about them and were willing to extend themselves at time of crisis beyond their formal role was also meaningful. It has the practical benefit of modeling to students behaviors that they should adopt with their clients. While this needs to be done in a careful manner to avoid crossing the boundary between teaching and counseling roles, it is important to remember that unusual times call for unusual measures. Still, questions remain as to how far beyond the formal role is appropriate and who gets to decide. Second, upon return to class after a community disaster, faculty may want to consider dedicating time to discuss students' experience. This may be the first, and sometimes only, opportunity where students are given the message that it is acceptable to process their own experiences and take care of their own needs before they are well positioned to take care of their clients. Systematizing a period of sharing once school resumes is important although it may mean missing more instruction time. Giving students the opportunity to talk about their experiences has numerous benefits for them as evolving health care professionals. Moreover, given the chance that students may experience delayed reactions (which is consistent with the literature about the impact of stress, e.g. Bonanno & Mancini, 2008), it is important to monitor students' reactions during subsequent classes.

Third, interventions should use a diverse range of strategies and address both emotional and practical aspects of students' experiences by listening to their narratives, providing support, and psycho-education, calming, validating, and normalizing. Fourth, schools may consider developing and implementing faculty training in crisis intervention. Some faculty with practice background and especially those with group

work and trauma knowledge are better equipped to understand and effectively address students' stress reactions. It may be beneficial to share this knowledge and skills so that the school, or department as a unit, is ready to identify and address students' needs at times of crisis. Fifth, based on the students' differential use of the LMS discussion board, related to the course routine, it may be useful to include the use of the discussion board tool of LMS as a platform for informal communication among classmates and with the faculty as a preventive measure in all courses.

This report has several limitations. First, it is based on the interaction of a non representative group of students as only those who had some access to power and the internet from their home, public libraries and mobile phones were able to be in contact, and only those who had means of transportation could attend class. Thus it is plausible that some of those most badly hurt who might have been in most need, might also not have access to communication devices or to the instructor and classmates during the crisis. Second, while it is based on quite a large and diverse group of students, it is anecdotal and the suggestions offered here require systematic evaluation as well as examining short- and long- term outcomes. For example, we do not have exact numbers representing students' attendance and responses. In retrospect, it would have been useful to keep better records of these outcomes. However, as mentioned before, at the time our focus was on offering support to the students and not on systematic data collection. In addition, in spite of their diversity on many dimensions, all students come from suburban and urban environments in a large metropolitan area. Examination of the applicability of the aforementioned strategies and necessary adjustments to students in different contexts (e.g. rural areas) is called for to develop more nuanced principles for tailoring interventions to the unique characteristics and needs of diverse student populations exposed to stress.

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