

# A FIRE TRAGEDY: THE STORY OF A VICTIM

<sup>1</sup>Sapora Sipon

## Abstract

The literature on disaster clearly demonstrates the potential economic, social and psychological impact of the victims. Regardless of the level of its impact, the victims experience stress for disaster brings immediate, pervasive and catastrophic effects. Disaster directly threatens people's lives and destroys basic resources needed for survival. This paper traces the journey of a victim in the aftermath of a fire tragedy. It investigates the victim's various coping strategies so as to meet his well-being and face the reality of the tragedy. The role of social support as one of the victim's coping skill is also being investigated. Specifically, this paper will focus on the victim's subjective appraisal as one of the pervasive coping skills.

## INTRODUCTION

Disasters affect people in many ways. The majority of person exposed to a disaster does well and have only mild and transitory symptoms. (Duckworth, 1986). However, some individuals develop post-disaster illness. In others, it may mean loss of loved ones, loss of home and property and important or cherished belongings.. The emotional effects of loss and disruptions may show up immediately or may appear many weeks or months later. The effect of the disaster lingers long after its occurrence, rekindled by new experiences that remind the victim of the past traumatic event. Being a victim of a natural disaster is not a single point in time. It is an ongoing condition that goes on months after the disaster. As a result, disaster involves both posttraumatic and chronic stress. A disaster not only leaves a trail of property destruction in its wake, many times it leaves thousands of victims damaged a sense of balance. In addition to restoring buildings and replacing material possessions, during the recovery period, victims may need to devote time to restoring their own emotional equilibrium.

## TELLING A STORY

Telling a story is also one way of restoring the victim's own emotional equilibrium. Telling one's survival story is more than merely recounting the events of one's personal encounter with disaster. It offers the victim an opportunity to face, accept, and acknowledge powerful situations. Hearing the victim's story is a process that helps the victim in beginning to reorganize the enormity of what has happened and its consequences, (Echterling, 1989). Telling a story is an act of helping the survivor to organize the information needed to assess the disaster impact. It also helps the victim to think more clearly and completely about the current circumstances. The process of telling

---

<sup>1</sup> School of Psychology & Social Work, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Beg Berkunci 2037, 88999 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia ; e-mail :sapora@ums.edu.my

a story also aids a survivor in the search to find some meanings in the event that has taken place. The process also helps to reconnect to survivor who often feels alienated. A number of theoretical models concerned with the processing of emotional events suggests that the failure to confide and disclose the details of the events is associated with increased health and psychological problems. (e.g Pennebaker, Hughers & O'Heeron, 1987, Rahman, 1980 in Dingman, (1995). Dingman (1980) suggests that the need to suppress strong emotion may impede the processing or resolution of emotionally upsetting experiences. In addition, Drabek (1986) suggested that avoidance of aversive and emotional state acts to reinforce a learned association between traumatic stimuli and behavioral responses. Thus telling one story is an essential part of coping with disaster.

Jones (1985) denotes that survivors of traumatic events have benefited from finding something good that came out of traumatic experiences. In a study conducted by a group researcher at Washington University in St Louis, it was found that the survivors have used the traumatic event to reorganize their lives. People who felt they were going to die during the disaster were especially likely to report personal growth as a result of the experience. This paper tells of a survivor who have benefited from a fire tragedy. The traumatic event has made the victim to reorganize and prioritize his life.

This paper will relate the experience of a fire victim, which occurred about nine months. This paper is the author's effort in using story as one coping skills of a disaster victim. It will also relate the personal growth of the victim due to the incident and how he was able to handle the traumatic events and reorganized his life. The story was told and written in the Malay language "Bahasa Melayu" and was translated by the writer in English.

## **THE STORY TOLD BY THE VICTIM**

I am a third-year university student in the School of social science in one of the local universities. I am staying in the school hostel and the house that was burnt down was situated in one of the many islands just a few kilometers from Kota Kinabalu, the city of Sabah. My parents are both old and my father suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure. I am the eldest in the family of five. My youngest brother is four years old and a nine-month niece is staying with my family. The house that was burnt down was a wooden one.

## **THE FIRE TRAGEDY**

The tragedy struck one night when my family and I were soundly asleep. That night, we had dinner together. I took a day off from my university to conduct an interview for my university assignment. It was a clear night and the weather was rather warm. However, I had no difficulty in getting to sleep.

I was suddenly awakened by sounds of shouting, screaming and crying. Realizing that it was not a dream, I got up from the bed and wanted to know what was going on. I saw my nine year old brother running as fast as he could getting out from the house and shouted 'fire, fire'. It was then; I realized that our house was on fire. For a few seconds, I

Panicked, not knowing what to do. The first thing that I did was to look for my father for I feared that he could not get out from the house due to his old age. I shouted for his name but there were no answers. It was to my relief when I saw him a few meters away from the burning house. The scenes of people running and crying were still fresh in my mind. My neighbors were seen trying to save things that they could. In desperation, one of my neighbors jumped out of the window of the house.

Three brigades of fire fighters came to the scene. The fire was not extinguished until early Thursday morning at around 2.20 am due to several measures, which has caused the slowdown of fire control and property saving the works including

- The low water pressure from the fire hydrants

- The wind factors causing quite fire spread

- The two closely clustered in-between and around the squatter-like homes.

Fortunately there were no serious injuries or deaths although about 100 people were displaced out of their homes. A total about 25 houses were affected in the fire disaster. Some were totally burnt down, the others being partly damaged. Various actions were taken to see the needs of the victims are met and aid was given in a timely manner. In terms of relocation of victims, with the generous community support and help from in and around neighboring villages, affected families were given temporarily shelter at nearby community hall or being received at friends or at relative's homes.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL EFFECT

The loss of my house, my family's valued possessions, have at times put me into the risk of severe stress response. Here, I have seen people lost their possession, the homes. At times, I feel depressed for I have revived memories of prior trauma. I also feel sad, angry towards myself and asked why it had to happen to me. It was as if I lost control of myself. I also experienced various experiences. Immediately following the disaster, I experienced a sense of disbelief and confusion. However, after a few months, I began to experience feelings of denial, anger, irritability, and apathy. At times, I began to withdraw socially.

I do admit that I have recurring thoughts or nightmares about the events for the first weeks of the tragedy. Sometimes, the flash of the lightning and the crash of the thunder can become the reminder of the tragedy that I faced. Even normal life event can cause anxiety and bring to mind a destroyed home. I experience anxiety and fear especially when exposed to events or situations reminiscent of the trauma. Sometimes, I feel scattered and I was unable to focus on work or daily activities. It was not uncommon for me to feel irritated, angry and resentful. It is easy to see the physical impact of a disaster but what about the psychological impact and emotional, the hidden worries. Many people have emotional wounded that are long-standing but hidden. My friend told me that I appeared to be coping well. They say that time heals. However, I am not sure whether I ever get over it. Although these symptoms decreased over times, some were deep and enduring.

I must say that I was not the only who are wounded. My friend also experienced guilt for not being able to reach out at me. My neighbors also experienced anxiety and fear and other symptoms of posttraumatic stress. They were afraid that their houses would be the ones, which got burnt.

### **PROTECTOR OF THE FAMILY**

As the eldest in the family, at times, I was feeling extremely protective of, or fearful for the safety of love ones. I feared that my old sick father was too fragile to face the reality. I was also very protective of my siblings whom I thought was too young to face the reality.

### **RELIGIOUS BELIEF**

However, my religious belief gave me strength. I have to be extra patients especially when I am the eldest in the family. I feel that if I could avoid feeling needless alarm and irrational panic in terms of crisis, my siblings would be able to react positively. However, I also felt that my unwillingness to discuss that tragedy may actually result in an effect opposite to what was intended, My concealment or evasion may increase a child's apprehension and anxieties. My role as a guide and source of support for my families makes me feel that I should not burden them with my in capabilities of coping. However, I found that a child should not be burdened with entails of misfortune which he couldn't comprehend he should be given.

### **FACING THE REALITY**

I have to accept the fact that things do not instantly restore themselves. As in the case of my house, restoration of my house takes times. In times of financial constraint, I have to realize that building and restoration of a new house is far from easy. I have to learn that healing often takes place after a disaster. My family couldn't afford to build a new house, so we had to remain here. We wanted to move but we could not afford it. My family have to cope with onset reminder, economic hardships and losses that continue even months later.

### **THE FLIP SIDE OF DISASTER**

The incident/tragedy has for somehow facilitated me more toward health. I reorganize a previously disorganized life, reorienting value and goals. I admit that I experienced psychological distress but I also described positive outcome. I learnt that I could handle crises effectively I have developed an important reprioritization I have found something good that came out of the experience. I realized how much I loved my family. Then, I decided that life was too short not to follow my dreams.

### **CONCLUSION**

Disaster leaves psychological wounds that are often hidden, long-term and widespread. However, many disaster victims develop into survivors. A natural helping network evolves to promote the recovery process by offering practical assistance, sharing stories, giving emotional support, and performing rituals. Disaster interveners help all survivors to carry on the recovery process by providing outreach, consultation, support and follow-up intervention. This article has presented the experienced of a fire victim/survivors. There are many lessons that could be learnt from the story of the victim. Among others, disaster maybe time-limited but they leave psychological wounds that are often hidden. The second lesson is that hidden healing often takes place after a disaster. These lessons present important implications such as support group, follow-up interventions. It is hoped that the story told would be beneficial to other victims.

### References

- Dixon, P. (1991). Vicarious victims of a maritime disaster. British Journal of Guidance and Counseling.
- Dingman, R.L et al (1995). Disaster victims. Counseling of mental Health. Journal of mental health counseling. 17, 259-263.
- Drabek, T. (1986). Human responses to Disaster. An inventory of Sociology findings. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Duckworth, D.J. (1986). Psychological Problems arising from Disaster Work: Stress Medicine. 2, 315-323.
- Jones, D.R (1985)., Secondary Disaster victims. American Journal of Psychiatry.
- Echterling, L.G. (1989). An art of preventing school absenteeism following a flood. Journal of Primary Prevention. 9 (3), 177-184.