

COURSE : DISASTER MANAGEMENT (MA/MSc PART I)

Paper : I

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Topic : Disasters and Human Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

The term "disaster myth" has been created to describe the belief that people will behave in an irrational, uncontrolled, and even extreme manner outside of normal and accepted social standards despite evidence that proponents state prove otherwise. Proponents of the term further state that people will only act irrationally in the direst of circumstances when terrible danger is imminent and no avenue of escape appears available. They argue that these disaster myths cause a negative impact when they cause people, officials, and disaster-relief organizations to make detrimental or incorrect disaster planning and response decisions.

One commonly held disaster myth is that people develop an insurmountable, illogical fear in the face of a disaster. In turn, this fear becomes infectious, spreads to others, and causes people to flee without thinking and in a chaotic manner that could hurt those around them.

In fact, just the opposite can be expected in most cases. Even when experiencing the increased stress from an earthquake, since they arrive unannounced and it is not known when the aftershocks will end, people continue to act rationally. Not only do few people panic, most are unwilling to participate in an organized evacuation. Those who live in the disaster area tend to stay in place. The only ones who usually flee are the visitors, tourists, and transients. Disasters also draw people to the area. Some want to help while others just want to see the destruction.

HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

The general public and organizations involved in emergency planning, management, and response all tend to accept this disaster myth as reality. Panicking can cause harm to others if people flee without thought. Staying put can be even worse since the people are not getting away from the disaster's damage and destruction. When necessary, people should evacuate in an orderly manner to avoid the disaster. It also provides an opportunity to help others evacuate who may need assistance. The myth of panic can cause officials to be cautious when issuing public bulletins. By not wanting to instigate or amplify the believed panic, officials may wait too long to provide the information on which the populace should act. To avoid contributing to or increasing the level of this mythical panic, officials have also chosen to not share information about preparations for some types of disasters (e.g. chemical and biological attacks).

The antithesis of the panic myth was seen with Orson Welles' The War of the Worlds radio broadcast in 1938, the 1942 Cocoanut Grove nightclub fire, and as Hurricane Carla approached the Gulf Coast areas of Texas and Louisiana in 1961. Rational behavior also dominated after earthquakes in Europe, North and South America, and Asia. Despite many reports of widespread panic, evidence later proved otherwise. The myth of panic affecting the official warnings of authorities has been seen in Mexico when the Rio Grande River flooded, in Italy during the flooding of the city of Florence, and after a volcanic eruption in Japan. In the instances when authorities chose to send the military instead of humanitarian organizations in response to Hurricane Katrina, it was in some part to help manage and control the perceived panic among the population.

Many people believe those who experience a disaster firsthand experience emotional trauma that has both immediate and lasting effects. It is thought the initial devastation of the disaster leaves people too fragile and in shock. As such, they are unable to cope with their situation or participate in recovery efforts. They are consequently dependent on assistance from outside relief agencies.

Only in a small minority of cases does this myth turn out to be true. And many times, the experienced shock is short-lived. What in fact happens in most cases is people react immediately to the disaster and its effects. The disaster can also be a jolt of energy which drives people to respond to the emergency. Those who went through the disaster are the first engaged in relief and rescue efforts before any outside agency. They come together along familiar lines such as family and friends and then move as needed to a larger scale involving groups with which they associate (e.g. churches). If the familiar cannot be contacted or they are unable to respond, only then do most people look toward the faceless law enforcement, welfare, and relief organizations for assistance. People will also seek help from outside the familiar when special equipment or medical skills are required.

The myth of widespread shock leads outside relief organizations to plan their efforts as if they are the only ones who will be providing assistance. This may create a disconnected rather than complementary relationship between them and the local agencies. Additionally, the feeling on the part of the survivors that they do not need to rely on outsiders coupled with the relief organizations believing they are saviors creates a wall between the two which in turn inhibits communication, coordination, and effective relief and recovery efforts.

1. Assistance

People believe the population impacted by a disaster are unable to do anything about their situation so are standing by just waiting for the saviors from afar to swoop in with the solution to all of their suffering. Not only that, relief organizations often think the

aid must be provided immediately. This myth is especially pervasive when the disaster strikes a third-world country and it is a “superior” western country coming to the rescue.

While relief organizations with emergency managers, medical teams, and the like do offer assistance after a disaster, most people are actually saved by other survivors and local authorities, agencies, and organizations.

2. Resources

Outside rescue, relief, and recovery agencies almost always miscalculate the amount of available resources for basic needs that are available locally in the aftermath of a disaster. They believe there are not enough materiel, supplies, and personnel for the initial response.

In fact, there are usually enough supplies to last several weeks. Enough food can normally be found in stores, warehouses, and people's homes. Clothing is rarely needed. Medical supplies reside in hospitals, warehouses, or nearby communities. Hospitals as well as police and fire departments often transition to 24-hour operations.

3. Crime

The prevalence of looting in the wake of disasters is another common myth. It is thought that disasters provide cover for criminal activity. In this scenario, people take advantage of law enforcement and other agencies responsible for maintaining the peace, safety, and security being occupied with disaster response and relief efforts. People believe criminals will use the disaster as an opportunity to loot due to a prevalence of evacuated, abandoned, and unguarded homes and stores.

While looting can occur, they are always isolated incidents. And much reported looting is either entirely false or, at worst, desperate survivors scavenging for necessities.

4. Morale

People tend to believe that survivors are extremely negative after a disaster and need to assurance that the outside world cares and the future is bright for themselves and their community.

In fact, people are most often optimistic and have very high morale in a disaster's aftermath. They frequently subordinate any personal feelings of loss and suffering in order to apply themselves to providing food, shelter, and other services to those in need. Their motivation to help one another boosts the sense of community and togetherness.

5. Disease

When a disaster results in deaths, especially in large quantities, people often believe they are at considerable risk of catching a disease from them. They also believe disease epidemics develop in the wake of disasters.

The fact that they died from the disaster does not make them a risk for spreading diseases. If a body does carry a communicable disease, the person already had it when he or she was alive. The fact that the body is now stationary and will remain in one place makes it less of a risk than prior to death.

6. Perpetuation of myths

People who have experienced a disaster often believe the dramatic accounts of their own suffering. It allows them to pass off their actions as atypical and heroic. In the process of telling others about their involvement, the mythic component of their story is spread along with the reality.

Disaster survivors tend to worry about looting. Their increased anxiety can cause them to spread reports whether they definitely know of any or not. While most people who are asked admit to not having personally witnessed or experienced looting, many claim of being aware of it elsewhere. The belief in looting can make people jump to the conclusion that looting was the cause of items going missing before considering the disaster may have moved, buried, or destroyed them.