Healing the Wounds of Trauma
A Supplemental Lesson on Disaster Response

2016
HELPING PEOPLE IMMEDIATELY AFTER A DISASTER

1. Mudslide

One morning Pastor Emmanuel and his wife Anne were listening to the radio as they drank their morning tea. They were shocked to hear that a large mudslide had just swallowed up half a village in northern Bingola. As they were talking about this, the phone rang. It was Emmanuel’s friend from Bible school, Peter, who lived in that area. It was nearly impossible to understand Peter as he poured out his horror over what had happened, but they heard one thing clearly: “Come and help us!”

As Emmanuel prayed with Anne, he thought, “Where do we start?” He went off to find the head of his denomination, Silas.

“We have to find out if the people near the mudslide are getting physical help,” said Silas. “And what about the other churches here in the capital? We need to work together. Give me a couple of days to find out what is going on, and then we will meet again. Emmanuel, can you find out who has been trained in trauma healing in that area?”

Two days later Silas and Emmanuel met with a few more of their pastors in the capital. This time the group also included a Catholic priest and two pastors from other denominations. Silas told them, “There are a number of organizations working in the mudslide area to bring practical and physical help to the people. But we are also hearing of a great need for emotional help. One man who lost his family killed himself. They need trauma healing there very soon.”

The Catholic priest, Claude, spoke up then. “We are hearing from the priests and catechists in the area that they need help. They feel overwhelmed by the trauma.”
Then Emmanuel said, “I’ve found the names and phone numbers of two people near the area who are trauma healing facilitators, and I’ve talked to them on the phone. They are willing to go, but not alone.” After a long discussion, the group decided that a team from the capital should go to the mudslide area the next week. That team should include trauma healing facilitators from the different denominations and churches. Silas promised to work on the question of funding for the trip.

The next week six people left from the capital city. When they reached the area, the first thing they did was to meet with top church leaders. They took a long time to listen to them, and then they talked with them about trauma healing. “But how do we help and listen to hundreds of people?” asked one of the local leaders.

“We’ll work by multiplication.” Emmanuel explained. We will train you, and help you by listening to your stories, then you will train more leaders in your churches who will in their turn help your members. In this way we can help hundreds of people.”

“Don’t forget the children!” Father Claude added. “We need to think about how we can help the children who have lost their family members or their houses.”

“And we need to be sure that there are healing groups set up that can continue after we leave,” added Emmanuel.

The group from the capital spent an exhausting two weeks putting this plan into practice with the leaders in northern Bingola. As they sank into their seats in the minibus for their trip home, Emmanuel said, “Phew! All I want to do now is sleep for a week! But I really feel we have made a difference. There is still a lot of sadness there, but I feel they have a way now to move toward the healing that only Jesus can bring.” There were murmurs of agreement, and then all you could hear in the bus were gentle snores!

**SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. List the order in which help was needed in northern Bingola.
2. What kinds of emergencies are likely in your area?
2. Getting organized after a disaster

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

How can we get organized to help immediately after a disaster?

Discuss in the large group. Add any items from the list below that are not already mentioned.

Partners: Meet with partners and decide:

- Who will be the lead organization?
- Who will do what, where, and when? Victims may need food, shelter, medical help, reconnecting with loved ones, and trauma care.
- How will partners stay informed of activities and needs?
- How will requests for help and money be handled?
- If victims are in restricted access locations like refugee camps, how can they be reached?

Facilitators: Meet with trauma healing facilitators for a day or more to go over trauma symptoms and listening skills, and to organize who will do what where and with whom.

Materials: People are less likely to read after a disaster, so keep any printed materials short. Audio programs on trauma healing may be especially helpful. Where appropriate, at the end of a visit, facilitators could leave a small printed flier or card with a short Bible verse (Ps 34.18; Ro 8.38–39a) and a peaceful picture or symbol. On the back, list trauma symptoms and things that help recovery. Some people may appreciate the Scripture Companion booklet.

Funding: Alert any international or national organizations that may be interested in sending funds or supplies.

SMALL GROUP EXERCISE

Imagine a disaster has just happened in your area. Now:

1. List the partners you work with who you would mobilize after a disaster. How can you build relationships to be ready?
2. What facilitators are in place? What materials are available?
3. **Meet with victims in a large group immediately after a disaster**

After a disaster, people need an opportunity to tell what happened to someone who knows how to listen. Explain that each person will have the opportunity to talk with a facilitator about what happened and how they are feeling, but that this is not a time to discuss practical needs or to request funds. Not everyone will want to talk to a facilitator, so invite but do not force.

**A. Recognize normal reactions to trauma.**

Each person responds to trauma differently. Here are some normal reactions (see also Lesson 2). Help people realize that often these will go away with time.

- People may find that their heart begins to pound fast and they breathe fast. They may have headaches and stomachaches. They may have trouble sleeping or have no appetite. They may feel shaky or exhausted.
- They may be confused and not be able to concentrate or make good decisions. They may be anxious, overwhelmed, or depressed. They may blame themselves for what happened. They may be irritable and angry.
- They may want to be alone.
- They may try to avoid how they are feeling by using drugs or alcohol, working nonstop, overeating, and so forth.
- They may do things that, in the end, will bring them harm, like smoking, spending more than they can afford, engaging in sexual immorality, and so forth.
- They may have accidents.

If children have been affected, go over the ways trauma affects children and how adults can help (see Lesson 4). To work directly with the children, use parts of the *Healing Hearts Club* materials (for example, Lessons 1–3).
B. Know what will help you recover more quickly.

- Take care of your body. Eat nutritiously, exercise, and get as much sleep as your body needs.
- Reestablish routines and set small goals that you can accomplish.
- Express your pain. Talk to someone. Write or draw about what happened and share it with someone. Tell God how you are feeling. Write a lament.
- Sing or listen to soothing music.
- Laugh when you can. Cry as needed.
- Spend time with people who are positive and helpful.
- Ask for help and accept the help others offer.
- Learn to calm yourself with the breathing exercise, the container exercise, or the tree exercise (at the end of this lesson).

C. Watch out for things that will hurt your recovery.

- Making big decisions.
- Being very busy.
- Drinking alcohol or drinks with caffeine.
- Taking drugs to sleep.
- Talking in public about what happened before you have had time to recover.

As people wait their turn to talk with a facilitator, have snacks and beverages available if possible. Minimize distractions—silence cell phones, have someone care for small children, and so forth.

4. Listening to individuals

Arrange a private place for facilitators to meet individually with each person. Normally, people can be helped in one session, but some people may need more help.

Help the person feel at ease and assure confidentiality (see Lesson 2, Section 4).

Use the three questions to guide your listening:
1. What happened?
2. How did you feel?
3. What was the hardest part for you?

Use these additional questions, if appropriate, to help the person realize that some good things have been a part of the experience:

- Who helped you?
- Were you able to help others?
- What gave you strength to get through?
- Did you see God in this situation? Explain.

If the person is not able to talk about their experience, ask them to draw a picture and try to discuss it. If you are listening to two or more people together, encourage them to share their story but not to dwell on the most difficult parts, as that may traumatize the others.

5. Ongoing care

After the individual listening sessions, arrange for someone to listen to the facilitators themselves so they can express how they were affected by all that they heard. This can be done individually or in a small group.

People should be calm before they leave, so do an exercise to help them relax before they go, either with each person or in the large group: the tree exercise, the container exercise, or the breathing exercise, all included at the end of this lesson.

Encourage people to write a lament after the session or to draw about their experience. Close with a prayer.

Stay in contact with the people who have shared and invite them to join a trauma healing group after things have settled and they are able to reflect more on their experience.

CLOSING EXERCISES

1. Do a roleplay of listening after a disaster. Discuss it. Then have everyone practice listening with another person. Be sure everyone understands they should not preach or give advice.
2. Practice the breathing exercise, the container exercise, or the tree exercise.
People with wounded hearts can be overcome by strong feelings. This breathing exercise can help them learn to take control and relax.

1. Get into a comfortable sitting position.
2. Close your eyes if you like. Think only about your own breathing.
3. Slowly breathe in and out, filling your lungs and slowly releasing the air. Think to yourself, “[Your name], feel yourself relaxing as oxygen is flowing in and out.”
4. Think about being in a quiet place. It might be the beach, or on a hill or in a tree. You might be alone or with someone who cares for you. You might think about Jesus telling you how much he loves you.
5. Continue to think about your breathing, flowing in and out, in and out.
6. After five minutes, open your eyes. Stretch and take one more deep breath.

Sometimes we can be overwhelmed by what we have experienced but we are not in a situation where we can express how we feel. This exercise can be helpful.

Close your eyes, or just look down at the floor so you are not distracted. Imagine a big container. It could be a big box or a shipping container. Imagine a way to lock the container, like a key or a padlock.

Now imagine putting all the things that are disturbing you right now into the container: big things, small things—everything that is disturbing you. When they are all inside the container, close it. Now lock the container and put the key somewhere safe. Do not throw it away. When you are ready, open your eyes and look up.

Later, find a time when you can get quiet. Take the key, open the container, and take out the things you have put inside one by one. You may want to do this with someone who can help you talk about these things. Do not leave them in the container forever!
TREE EXERCISE

This is an exercise for increasing resiliency. Doing this exercise when you are not under stress will help you be able to relax in times of stress.

Read Psalm 1 (very important!). Now close your eyes (or, if that makes you uncomfortable, just fix your eyes in one place). Imagine that you are a tree.

• What kind of tree would you be? See yourself as that kind of tree.
• In your imagination, look around. Is your tree by itself?
• What’s the landscape around you?

Now look at the trunk of the tree.

• Notice it going down into the earth and up into the branches. Follow the branches way out into the leaves. (If it’s a fruit tree: See the fruit hanging from the branches).

Now follow the trunk down to the roots.

• Look at the roots—is it a long single root or many roots going out? Notice how the roots are anchored into the ground.
• Now watch how the root system is bringing water and nutrients to the roots and how those nutrients travel up the tree to the branches.

Notice the weather.

• Imagine the sun shining on the leaves, making oxygen. Imagine the tree just being there with just the right temperature and light.
• Now the tree needs a bit of water. Imagine a gentle rain slowly coming down over the leaves and going towards the roots. See the water going down, down into the roots. See the moisture being taken up into the tree.
• Now stop the rain and imagine the sun coming out again to dry the leaves.

Now imagine the tree with some live creatures—perhaps birds, or squirrels or insects going up and down. Watch all the activity.

Now there’s a storm.

• Black clouds are beginning to form in the distance. The storm won’t harm or destroy the tree but the storm will come.
• The wind is picking up and the clouds are coming. The branches are shaking. The trunk is moving back and forth. Some of the leaves are falling and some of the fruit is falling.
• Now focus on how the roots are holding firm and allowing the tree to move back and forth in the wind. Let the storm go on a bit. Feel the tree moving back and forth with its roots firmly planted in the ground.
• Now the storm is slowing gradually until everything is still again.
• How is the tree feeling after the storm?
• Now the sun is returning. The insects and birds are coming back out again. Things are drying. Imagine the tree coming back to normal.

When the tree is still again, the sun is shining, the insects and the birds are back out again, gradually take some deep breaths and open your eyes.
Trauma symptoms typically last from a few days to a few months, gradually fading as you process the unsettling event. But even when you’re feeling better, you may be troubled from time to time by painful memories or emotions—especially in response to triggers such as an anniversary of the event or something that reminds you of the trauma. If your psychological trauma symptoms don’t ease up or if they become even worse, and you find that you’re unable to move on from the event for a prolonged period of time, you may be experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). While emotional trauma Healing trauma starts with understanding it and the vast array of emotions that can come along with it. When you’ve started to understand your trauma and how it affects you, you can start implementing change but not before then. What is childhood trauma? Childhood trauma is one of the hardest things to recover from and one of the deepest wounds to heal. When we are touched by danger and loss of self-sovereignty as a child, it haunts us into our adulthood and the relationships we rely on for happiness and fulfillment. Minimize the impact of childhood trauma by learning how to understand the ways in which trauma has affected your life. Includes bibliographical references (p. 235-239) and index. Forgotten survivors: what happens to those who are left behind -- Changing organizations and the end of job security -- Learning from the past: the survivor syndrome across time -- Speaking for themselves: layoff survivor stories -- Time does not heal all wounds: the effects of long-term survivor sickness -- Four-level process for handling layoffs and. Their effects -- Level one: manage the layoff processes -- Level two: facilitate the necessary grieving -- Level three: break the codependency chain and empower people -- Level four: bu