

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO DISASTER: WHAT ARE THE KEY
PARAMETERS FOR RESEARCH?

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The patterns of psychological response to disaster have been vividly described by many workers, from Wolfenstein's classic volume, *Disaster: A Psychological Essay*(1), to the powerful documentation of the horror of Buffalo Creek in K. Erikson's "In the Wake of the Flood"(2). The possible psychopathological consequences have also been studied by many workers, for instance as reviewed by Kinston and Rosser(3), and demonstrated in recent studies, e.g., Adams and Adams(4); Holen, Sund and Weisaeth(5); Wilkinson(6), Patrick and Patrick(7); Bromet, Parkinson, Schulberg et al(8).

Various rationales may be proposed for the scientific study of psychological response to disaster. It may be studied for counterdisaster management objectives: to define patterns of response to warning, threat and impact of disaster; and behaviours in the inventory, rescue and recovery phases that follow.

Adaptational, survival oriented responses may be identified. Non-adaptive responses may be predicted or managed. Much of the research relevant to this view has come from sociologists (e.g., Quarantelli(9)). Weisaeth attempted to examine these factors in a factory fire and has drawn some valuable conclusions(10).

Psychological response to disaster may also be studied for the purpose of defining pathological outcomes in terms of health generally, or specifically psychiatric disorder; or other forms of decompensation. The ultimate aim in this case would be to examine correlating factors and possible service implications so that such pathological outcomes could be prevented(11,12,13) or managed (14,15,16,17).

A third purpose may be for the consideration of a stress model, which in the natural experiment context of disasters, may give clues to stressor and response effects applicable to other situations. The disaster as stressor has been considered theoretically(4), and in the life event context(18), where it has been compared and rated with other stressors and their effects. Adam and Adam(4) have a stress-reaction model for their research into the consequences of the Mount St Helen's Ashfall. Certainly some of the general symptomatology that appears after disaster(19) may be similar to that found after personal disaster stresses such as bereavement(20). Related to this is the possible effect of disaster as a stimulus