

Training for a Meaning

How one man's teachings are helping tsunami survivors cope.

By Josephine Rossi

ON DECEMBER 26, 2004, a 9.15 magnitude earthquake near the island of Sumatra triggered one of the worst natural disasters in memory. Walls of water smashed into the coasts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and other neighboring countries, taking the lives of more than 280,000 people with them. Many of those who were able to cling to life sustained massive bodily injuries and lost family members and their possessions in the swift-moving waves.

More than six months after that violent tsunami wreaked havoc across Southeast Asia and Africa, relief efforts have just begun to peel back the layers of physical and emotional destruction left in its wake. The billions of dollars donated from around the world continue to ease the suffering of survivors, and the Red Cross alone estimates that more than 22,000 volunteers have been deployed to the ravaged areas as of March 26 of this year. But the challenge of rebuilding the flattened towns and shattered lives has just begun.

Aid workers must deal not only with the catastrophic destruction, but with less tangible needs of the estimated more than five million people living in the aftermath. At first, such efforts as treating the wounded, burying the dead, and monitoring sanitary conditions were given top priority. Now, efforts have turned to long-term rehabilitation. Workers are developing water-quality monitoring systems, establishing conducive educational environments for children, and helping displaced workers regain their livelihoods. Local governments also are facing the heart-breaking decision to invest relief money toward rebuilding its ailing tourism industry or helping survivors reconstruct their homes, hospitals, and schools.

Healthcare systems were particularly affected by the tragedy. In the province of Aceh, Indonesia—the area hardest hit by the monster waves—53 of the 244 health facilities were incapac-

tated or wiped off the map, according to the World Health Organization. Fifty-seven of the 497 healthcare staff members died, and 59 more were reported missing. Working in rudimentary conditions, those who were able treated the injured, provided counseling to the survivors, helped the stranded, and cared for the already ailing with scarce medical supplies. Now, their efforts are centered on long-term health capacity development such as epidemiological surveillance, immunizations, and mental health and psychosocial services.

For most volunteers, lending a hand in a foreign country had its own set of problems compounded by those already present. Language barriers, religious and cultural differences, political and social disputes, in addition to the unrelenting stress of the vast devastation, are just some of the factors facing aid workers. More troubling, the United Nations recently reported that it will take more than 10 years to rebuild some of the most heavily damaged areas. And while concerns about the reconstruction process abound among survivors, volunteers, and aid workers, the teachings of a renowned psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor are helping to ease frustrations.

Training to help

Viktor Frankl was born in 1905 in Vienna, Austria. He is best known for his landmark book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which was conceived partly from spending three years in several Nazi concentration camps. Its premise is Frankl's belief that all humans strive to find meaning in their lives. And by reflecting on that significance, people are able to withstand the most horrific of experiences.

Throughout the years, Frankl's teachings have been a source of solace for people coping with tragic events. His ideas are the backbone of a form of psychotherapy called logotherapy, and his book was named one of the 10 most influential by the U.S. Library of Congress.

In 2004—months prior to the deadly tsunami—Frankl's mentee, Alex Pattakos, published a user-friendly version of all of Frankl's principles called *Prisoners of Our Thoughts*. In it, he describes how Frankl's teachings can be applied to everyday work and personal life. While the book earned acclaim from CEOs and academics alike, Pattakos had no idea that he had just written a training primer to be used half a world away.

Somehow, the book had found its way into the hands of Nugroho Supangat and Istiqomah Djauhariah, managers for Dunamis Organization Services. The Jakarta-based professional services firm was in the process of developing a training program for volunteers working in the province of Aceh, which was closest to the epicenter of the quake.

They explained that the program, dubbed Volunteers' Readiness Program, was to bolster individuals' abilities to quickly and effectively respond to the vast devastation and suffering that they would encounter. It was to be employed not only by Dunamis, but by various other organizations including local government bodies, and nongovernment organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF.

The first session launched in early February of this year. It was an on-site train-the-trainer workshop consisting of 34 participants and one facilitator. The exercises and ideas from *Prisoners of Our Thoughts* served as a tool for introducing and explaining some of its objectives. To accelerate the learning process because of the immediate need of trained relief workers, participants then returned to their respective organizations and shared the learning with other volunteers. Those volunteers then worked with other volunteers and survivors, teaching what they had learned.

Djauhariah told Pattakos that they decided to use his book because of the coping skills it taught. As a result, the book became a resource for volunteers to learn how to lessen the impact of the catastrophe, while dealing with their own psychological reactions to the trauma. Of particular appeal to content developers were the psychosocial aspects

of Frankl's teachings.

The heart of the matter

At the center of the Volunteer Readiness Program are key components that volunteers must understand before working with the survivors. Dunamis's goal is to realistically prepare them for what they will encounter while working in the field. While focusing on specific skills, this training also concentrates on mental strategies for dealing with the after effects of a natural disaster.

No doubt people willing to pledge their time and hard work toward such a humanitarian effort arrive with the best of intentions. But sometimes those intentions aren't enough to get them through. Frankl's experience in the concentration camps taught him to survive amidst great suffering: He learned to adopt a "will-to-meaning" perspective. For the volunteers, that means finding a deeper connection to their relief work, not a political or social motivation. Ultimately, that meaning will help them deal with the suffering they'll witness.

Similarly, Dunamis officials recognized that the volunteers might not be prepared for the political, social, and religious settings in which they must work. This is particularly true of most Western volunteers whose frames of reference are completely different than those of the survivors they are trying to help. Not only do workers need to be primed for the tsunami-ravaged environment, they must also learn about, and, more important, respect, local cultural practices. For example, the WHO reported that many western clinical responses to acute stress disorders were most likely not appropriate in Sri Lanka where terms like "mental health" are not part of the native vocabulary. Consequently, mental health experts prescribe traditional forms of relaxation, such as yoga, to help victims cope with stress.

The readiness program also teaches participants not work against themselves or become so obsessed with an objective that they focus too much of their actions on achieving that goal. In his book, Pattakos tells readers that Frankl's concept of paradoxical intention is a proven way to deflate the fears that

are driving such behaviors. By asking patients to embrace their fears or even exaggerate them, Frankl noticed an immediate decrease in anxiety.

Another vital component in the readiness program is teaching participants how to let go. To be effective, no matter what their duties entail, aid workers must learn how to detach themselves from the situation and gain an objective perspective on their work. In the training program, participants are encouraged to incorporate humor and calming exercises into their daily routines to help them separate from their duties. They also learn to shift their focuses of attention as a coping method for dealing with stress and change. The children of Aceh seem to be more naturally adept at this than adults. Many aid workers marvel at their resiliency to play among their leveled homes and scattered possessions. They seem focused on the work ahead, not on what was lost.

A brighter tomorrow

The next six months will prove to be a crucial time for the areas destroyed by last year's tsunami. Efforts to rebuild schools, hospitals, and towns are already underway, as are massive vaccination campaigns and other disease control services. Communities have banded together to develop better response methods for future emergencies and are keeping vigil for serious and lasting psychological disorders such as depression, drug or alcohol abuse, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Still, it's hard to imagine that something positive could result from such a calamity, and fostering hope among a people whose wounds are still visible and raw is a tough feat. But through the generous donations of time and money and, of course, proper training, workers and survivors have started down that long road to recovery.

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