

Healing Hearts After the Asian Tsunami

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26th December 2004 started off like any other Sunday for me. I managed to sleep in, before heading off to Sunday lunch with my family. By the early afternoon however, the idyll was broken by media reports of a natural disaster of a scale that took the world several days to appreciate. At work, my colleagues and I started to talk of the impact of this disaster in terms of the physical environment as well as the psychosocial sequelae that would take place in the weeks and months ahead. As a clinical psychologist and Head Emergency Behaviour Officer (EBO) at the Ministry of Health, my thoughts focused on how I could assist surviving victims and their next-of-kin. The opportunity to put these thoughts into action came when I was told that I would be leading the first EBO team comprising 1 psychiatrist and 5 psychologists to Phuket, to render emotional support to next-of-kin who were making their way there in search of their loved ones. Having been similarly activated following the SQ006 air crash, I felt equal to the task, and went over in my mind what had to be done.

For the next 6 days, we made ourselves readily available to all, ranging from the Singaporean next-of-kin to first responders from the Singapore Police Force, Singapore Civil Defence Force and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Being the first team in Phuket, we also faced the task of setting up the Singapore Contact centre where we coordinated our operations together with the other Singapore government agencies. Following that, we swung into action, making contact with the next-of-kin who were already in Phuket. Making first contact with them proved to be critical in paving the way for any crisis counselling we may have to do later. However, this was not the agenda on their minds for

they were more concerned with getting information, if not actually finding their loved ones. To render assistance, we accompanied them to the hotels where their loved ones were last known to be, to hospitals where they could have been sent or to the mortuary to locate their bodies. The atmosphere was filled with anxiety, fear and worry, which at times gave way to frustration and anger when obstacles seemed to stand in their way.

As helpers, we found it difficult not to empathise with the victims and their families. To keep focused on our mission, we had to remind ourselves constantly of this tagline: 'Normal reactions in an abnormal situation'. To perform our new roles effectively, we had to discard our normal work functions of taking care of patients with psychological problems and adopt the mindset that we were helping normal people who were grieving after a major natural disaster. We also followed the 3 'S' principles of SELF-PRESERVATION, SAFETY and SIMPLE STRATEGIES. To help others, we must always help ourselves first by taking care of our needs, be it physical, psychological or social in nature. At times, this proved to be challenging, and we had to be sensitive to the needs of those around us. However, when the time came for us to pull out, we all felt that we had accomplished our mission – reaching out to the next-of-kin, and supporting the first responders. While not all of them, but we have made some form of contact with most of them. We will leave the next EBO team to continue healing the hearts of those affected. My 6 days in Phuket constituted a very rewarding experience, both personally and professionally. I felt sad about leaving but knew it was time to go home to some normalcy.