

CHAPTER #7
**PREPARATION: ASSESSMENT OF THE COMMUNITY, THE
DISASTER, AND THE RESPONSE**

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Introduction

In this chapter we will explore how to assess the community, the disaster history, and the players and personalities involved in a slow motion technological disaster (SMTD). As was discussed in chapter #3, it is vital to understand what type of disaster you are responding to, and the variety of disaster phases that individuals, families, and the community may be experiencing. The characteristics and phases will be wide-ranging in different types of disasters, resulting in a variety of psychosocial reactions. Therefore, an initial assessment of the disaster situation should be followed by an assessment of the community and of the players therein. Each disaster and community is unique, and these two assessment steps will provide a foundation for developing an appropriate and effective psychosocial response plan.

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This chapter will cover the assessment of:

- The history of the disaster and the community
- The characteristics and dynamics of players in the community and in the disaster response
- Any factions that are present in the community
- The available resources and unmet needs relative to the disaster's psychosocial issues

We will also discuss methods to determine the optimal placement and modeling of your psychosocial services, and using your assessment information to avoid pitfalls and unintended barriers to program utilization. Facts and commonly held perceptions sometimes diverge, especially in the hazy atmosphere of an SMTD. Your careful assessment, as outlined in this chapter, will help you understand why and when this schism occurs.

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7.1 Methodology

Methodologies for community assessment cover a continuum from formal to informal; in most cases you will be utilizing a combination of these. Obtaining input from a range of people with differing involvement and viewpoint will ensure that you have a 360 degree outlook on the dynamics of the disaster and its response. For example, conducting informal interviews with disaster victims, local business owners, social and medical service providers, and local government officials will prove useful in obtaining a range of perspectives on both the history and present status of the disaster. Cultivating positive relationships with key players, informants, and stakeholders in the disaster is an additional benefit of this type of informal information gathering process.

In addition to interviews and informal meetings, surveys and questionnaires can also be useful tools in identifying people's knowledge base, opinions, areas of concern, and biases about the disaster and its response. These too can be either quite informal, such as a brief questionnaire passed at a meeting, or formal, such as a comprehensive survey mailed county wide.

Information obtained from newspapers, census records, state health and welfare agencies, and county registration offices can paint an objective picture of the disaster's history and of the demographics of the population you will be working with. See the chart at the end of the chapter for a sampling of assessment target groups, methodologies, and questions.

7.2 Educate Yourself About the Health Impacts and History of the Disaster

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7.21 Health Impacts

It's the impact on human health that makes an SMTD a source of chronic stress on individuals and their communities. Understand that as an intervention worker, people will look to you for reliable information about the possible or actual health effects of the SMTD. Information that you will need to have, from the best authorities available, includes:

- The nature of the toxic substance
- The sources of information about the substance and its effects (studies, research, etc.)
- The symptoms and health effects
- The length of the latency period, if any
- The progression and outcomes of exposure linked diseases
- The degree of contagion or spread, if any
- How exposure related disease is screened for and/or diagnosed
- What popular misconceptions are held about all of the above that may vary from "expert" information?

7.22 History

In responding to an SMTD, it is vital to educate yourself about the history of the community and the history of the disaster itself. Often there are multiple perspectives regarding the disaster, and it's essential to remain objective and open-minded throughout your assessment process. The person—or team—in charge of addressing the psychosocial needs of an SMTD should remain as neutral as possible so they can be of assistance to the largest possible number of groups and individuals.

7. 221 History of the Community

Understand the history of the community and how this history has impacted and shaped the community dynamics and multiple perspectives. A good place to start is learning about the demographics of a community. This may include information and statistics about education and literacy levels; income levels; employment rates and traditional employment patterns; and distributions of varying ages, religions, ethnicities, and cultures. It is important to remember that understanding the culture of a community can also involve more subtle cultural and value based characteristics. A community may be predominately white, Anglo-Saxon, but still contain a range of cultural variety. Is it a conservative or liberal community? Are there dominant community wide values such as a reverence for nature, or a pronounced appreciation for hard work and self-reliance? Understanding these more subtle, value based characteristics will further assist you in understanding the community, enabling you to create an effective response plan.

In many rural communities, and even in some urban and suburban neighborhoods, there may be one or two principal employers playing a disproportionate role in the local economy and community. This can result in the development of strong loyalties to the company by individuals and families whose livelihood is dependent on the company. In addition, the community as a whole may develop a great loyalty to the company since many companies will donate and assist in the development of parks, ball fields, and other community nonprofit efforts. This “company town” loyalty can play a significant role in how a community responds when the company turns out to be a responsible party in a technological disaster (TD).

You will recall that all TDs contain an element of human causation, and therefore could potentially have been avoided. Consequently, when a TD strikes a community, some segments of the community may disbelieve that such an event could even occur, while others are immediately outraged. This leads to polarization within the community triggered by the release of information. The TD might strengthen divisions already present in the community—such as between blue- and white-collar workers—or cause new divisions between groups that were once united. Rumors, speculation and accusations may be mingled with the truth, leading to heightened feelings of betrayal and outrage, and exacerbating community divisions. Because of the complexity of uncertainties involved, such divisions will be further pronounced after an SMTD. The importance of understanding the community’s history will be further discussed in section 7.4 of this chapter.

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Community history factors to consider:

- What are the demographic characteristics of the community?
- What were the community groups, and what were their relationships like prior to the disaster?
- Are there a lot of old timer family groups? or, Are there a lot of newcomers?
- How do those and other groups get along?

- How would you characterize the community's economy? Stable? Boom/Bust? High Tech? Agricultural?
- What are the cultural, religious, and value based characteristics of this community?
- What was the responsible party's role in the larger community? Were they an integral part of the community? Did they contribute to local charities and causes?
- How did the community feel about and perceive the responsible party prior to the disaster?

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7.222 History of the Disaster

It is important to also assess the history of the disaster itself. First, because “how it happened” can significantly impact and shape the psychosocial impacts and reactions that your response plan hopes to address. And, secondly, because having—and being a source of—accurate and reliable information is critical to a successful intervention. This is particularly essential in SMTDs because people are bewildered, suspicious, and confused from the outset, wondering who knew what and how the disaster might have been avoided. If a subset of the population has taken on the activist role in exposing the disaster, some community members may view them as troublemakers, while others may perceive them as heroes. It is necessary in educating yourself about the history of the disaster to understand the cultural and interrelationship history as thoroughly as the “fact history” of who, how, what, when, and how much. Identifying intervention target populations and other community segments will be further discussed in Chapter #8.

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Disaster history factors to consider include:

- How long has the SMTD been occurring?
- What actually happened? What do the agencies believe happened and what do other factions believe happened?
- How did it happen and who was responsible?
- What toxic substance(s) were involved, and what is known about them?
- Were any individuals or groups aware that the SMTD was occurring?
- Was anyone trying to get the issue exposed? And if so, for how long?
- Was anyone trying to hide the disaster or cover it up? For how long?
- How was the SMTD fully exposed or discovered?
- Who, if anyone, could have prevented or stopped it from occurring?
- What health impacts are suspected or established?
- Are there any community divisions, and if so, what types or what groups?
- What controversies and public perceptions relate to the above questions?

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7.3 Understand “Player” Dynamics

In disaster response, many different groups, agencies, and organizations become involved in efforts to respond to the disaster. They may be either community based or outsiders, and may have differing agendas. Different players are likely to have their own internal and external relationship dynamics. Often new agencies and organizations will come to town to assist in the response, while new groups and coalitions may be emerging out of the existing systems in the community. This can be overwhelming and confusing for those impacted by the disaster, as everyone begins trying to define the disaster and determine what remedial actions to take.

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7.31 Key Bureaucratic Structures, Roles, and any Significant History

When an SMTD is identified, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and/or the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) are likely to be the first outsiders on the scene, spearheading the disaster response. Other agencies, such as the federal or state Department of Public Health, or the State’s Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) may also rush—or be coaxed and cajoled—onto the scene. In any disaster, responders may be mandated, that is legislatively charged with taking action. Or there may be organizations or agencies that step up to the plate for a variety of reasons. Sometimes that “stepping up” may be motivated more by political gain than by compassion, a perception that a victimized community will find offensive. There may also be “non-players who should be players” who are perceived as shirking their duty to respond to the disaster.

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Responders must be knowledgeable about which State and Federal agencies are involved, what their roles are, and what—if any—previous history they have related to the disaster. Considerations might include: was one of these agencies aware, at any point in history, that an exposure was occurring? In the past, did they get complaints from concerned citizens and do nothing about it? Is this their second time around because an incomplete job was done previously or the funding ran out? These past dynamics not only influence how the community receives these agencies, but they also influence potential psychosocial responses to the agencies and the disaster as a whole.

Other key players to consider may be local non-profit entities or governing bodies charged with, or volunteering to, assist in the disaster response. County governments, local hospitals, schools, churches, and other local grassroots organizations may become significantly involved in the disaster response. Understanding their roles, responsibilities, and their relationships with the other players will be necessary for disaster remediation efforts. Also, remember that these roles and relationships will not be static. A state of constant flux is normal in emergent response efforts.

In Libby, for example, one of the key players became the Center for Asbestos Related Diseases, or CÄRD Clinic. The CÄRD was established in the spring of 2000 by the local community hospital in order to provide a mechanism for responding to the results of an ATSDR screening protocol that eventually included over 7,000 individuals. Anticipating that quite a few of these people would receive letters advising that they receive a more extensive assessment of identified possible “lung abnormalities,” the CÄRD was set up with a nurse and physician who could provide follow up assessments, diagnoses, health education, and referrals to specialized care. Over the course of the next three years, the mission of the clinic grew to also include ongoing follow-ups and long term health care for asbestos related disease (ARD), oversight and coordination of research efforts related to ARD, and the provision of psychosocial services. Thus, the CÄRD became the ideal site for holistically addressing the multiple issues that this SMTD has brought to the community of Libby.

If it has been demonstrated—or is widely believed—that the SMTD was blatantly or criminally caused by some company or industry, it is less likely that the responsible party will be one of the players in the disaster response effort. It is not uncommon for community members to feel betrayed and to express anger, usually proportionate to the degree to which they believe they were intentionally injured by the responsible party. Understanding the community’s perspective, historically and currently, of the responsible party and understanding that party’s dynamics and relationships with other key players is crucial.

7.32 Organizational Charts

It can be very beneficial to create organizational charts, to define and illustrate the various players, their role in disaster response, their formal and operating structures, and their relationships to one another. This will help to minimize the confusion and frustration experienced by community members as they try to sort out the players and understand who can help them with their questions and concerns.

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7.33 Dynamics of the Response

Responses to disasters generally follow a formal, established process. Agencies will have, or quickly create, response protocols that set parameters and establish order for their response efforts, following predetermined steps over time. In order to have a uniform response, policies and procedures are often concrete and rigid. This may compound the frustration of community members, who may not understand the established policies and procedures or be discouraged by a response slower than what they feel is needed.

Key agencies, such as the EPA, should set up community forums where they can disseminate and regularly update information to the public, and address any questions that community members might have. So named Community Advisory Groups (CAG) can also be used as a two way street, giving the community a chance to contribute, as well as receive, important information. In Libby, for example, the EPA actively solicited information from the public

about areas around the community that may have been contaminated with the asbestos laced vermiculite ore through announcements at the CAG meetings.

Assessing the range of player characteristics in the disaster response will reveal how the community perceives the players. This community perspective significantly affects the psychosocial impacts and reactions people may be confronting, and thus an effective response plan. Do they feel that they have some control or significant involvement in the disaster response? Do they have confidence that these “outside” agencies understand what is going on? Is there trust or mistrust of these agencies?

7.34 Characteristics of the Spokesman

Agencies in charge of disaster response typically appoint one key individual who leads the response and is their public spokesperson. It is necessary to understand the characteristics of this spokesperson—and perhaps more importantly how he/she is perceived by the community—as they will greatly influence how the community receives the agency, and how the community psychologically responds to the remediation efforts.

A positive and effective spokesperson is essential. Important characteristics of the spokesperson include always telling the full truth, being honest when they don’t know something and willing to try to find out, and showing their human side, that they actually do care and empathize with how difficult this must be for the community. If there is any negative disaster history related to the agency—for example, a previous cover up or failure to act—the spokesperson’s ability to honestly acknowledge this without denial or minimization will be crucial to moving forward. This is just an introduction to some of the issues that surround an effective and dynamic spokesperson. There are more extensive materials available on this topic in the resources listed in Chapter #11.

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7.35 The Role of the Media

Media coverage and involvement plays a critical role in setting the mood of the community. As one of the main sources of *information*—which is the primary and ongoing stressor in SMTD (discussed in chapter #5)—the perspective of the media can have a huge impact on overall community reactions and player dynamics. Based on the way it represents various players and what it chooses to focus on and report, the media exerts tremendous influence over the community’s viewpoint and psychological response. Whether in the form of feature stories, commentaries, or letters to the editor, these influential sources of information shape the perception of the community about the disaster and the players in the disaster response, becoming in their own right one of the players. Therefore, include the role of the media, relationships, and dynamics with other players in your assessments.

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7.4 Identify any factions

As discussed above, and in more depth in chapter #3, the characteristics of an SMTD usually preclude the development of the therapeutic community typical of event-focused disasters. In contrast, because of the immense uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the disaster, conflicting factions with differing perspectives and opinions often develop. The when, how, where, why, and ifs of an SMTD can be hotly debated, fanning the fires of conflicting factions. In developing a psychosocial remediation plan, it is important to identify and understand the perspectives of these factions, while adopting the most neutral position possible. Steering clear of faction politics will allow you to effectively assist a full range of people, and avoid alienating those from any particular group.

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7.41 Community

Community factions often emerge out of sub-groups of the population having different perspectives about the disaster, how it should be defined, and if it does or does not need to be addressed. For example, in Libby, one of the first and most persistent divisions was between an activist group of families with personal knowledge of the lethality of the problem, and members of a business community already hard hit by mill closures and other economic downturns. Understanding community factions is grounded in educating yourself about the history of the disaster and the history of the community. If the community is small and close-knit, there may be additional divisions between or within certain families or groups based on past histories unrelated to the disaster. These preexisting historic divisions may have the intensity to carry through and impact how different groups respond to one another on any issues related to the disaster, or for that matter, any issue at all.

7.42 Inter-agency

In addition, different agencies may have different protocols and criteria for defining the problem, different priorities and personalities, and may advocate for differing responses. These factors can potentially lead to inter-agency tensions and factions which make for a longer, more fragmented, and less efficient disaster response.

7.43 People Being Blamed

If individuals, agencies, or business interests are being blamed for the disaster—or for not responding to the disaster appropriately—antagonism, mistrust, anger, and frustration can be directed at these entities. If, for example, a company is being blamed for the disaster, anyone who defends or associates with the company may be in one camp, while community members taking a stand against the company may be in the other camp. Company managers or employees who were not directly involved in the disaster may be in either camp, or caught in the crossfire between the two opposing factions. These types of divisions can emerge within families, workplaces, faith communities, and other segments of the community, creating a pervasive atmosphere of conflict, suspicion, and unrest. This is an important factor to assess when

considering the psychosocial impacts of the disaster, as people who previously have stood together through tough times find themselves on opposing sides of the issues.

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7.5 Assess Community Needs and Resources

Once you have educated yourself about the history of the community and the disaster, and you understand the player dynamics and recognize any factions, the next step is to assess the community's psychosocial needs and resources related to the disaster so you can begin to develop an effective psychosocial remediation plan. As in any intervention, there will always be barriers and obstacles to overcome; these will be covered in chapter #10.

The psychosocial sphere of practice encompasses an individual's emotional, physical, spiritual, financial, environmental, and interpersonal worlds. Psychosocial needs relative to an SMTD can range from the need for emotional outlets, to stress management education, to such concrete needs as financial assistance and transportation to disaster related services. In Libby, an economically depressed community prior to 1999, many individuals found it easier to ask for help with emotional coping after we had assisted them in applying for a medical benefit plan that had been established, or after arranging for help with yard chores they could no longer manage. As in Maslow's hierarchy, meeting basic needs for food, shelter, and security came before the exploration of discovering growth and meaning within loss and grief. By addressing the largest practical realm of "needs," a more effective and positive intervention is possible.

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Assessing community needs:

- What psychosocial related education is needed for those impacted, the general public, and those assisting in the remedial efforts?
- What unmet needs do those impacted by the disaster have?
- What are the priority needs?
- What services need to be set up? (health or exposure screenings?)
- What will be needed to expand the existing structure's response capacity?
- What will it cost to meet the needs?
- What are the financial or other barriers to getting resources to those who need them?

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Assessing community resources:

- What financial and social resources are available to address basic needs?
- What resources are available to address mental health and spiritual needs?
- What formal –and informal— structures and networks are already established and serving social needs?
- Do the existing community resources have the practical capacity to address these increased needs?

- Do existing community resources have the information or expertise to address issues specific to the disaster?
- What additional training and/or resources will they need in order to meet the demands of responding?

When assessing your community's resources, bear in mind that there may be no previously existing cohesive structure to the community based services that will be involved in response. They may even be fragmented at the outset. Ideally, such a structure—in the form perhaps of a resource council or network comprised of representatives from a range of agencies and organizations—can be developed in the early stages of the SMTD response.

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7.6 Decide Where to Place the Psychosocial Service Venue

As is well known in disaster response mental health services, people don't typically perceive themselves as needing mental health services in response to a disaster. However, the emotional and social impacts of a disaster can be overwhelming and coping can be extremely challenging. In psychosocial disaster response materials, it is usually recommended that the psychosocial services be placed alongside other disaster relief services. This is also true in SMTDs, as people will not typically seek out psychosocial remediation services, especially if they have already been coping with the slow onset of the disaster for many years.

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7.61 Factors to Consider

Consider the following factors when deciding where to locate psychosocial services, as this will greatly impact the utilization, and thus the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions. It will be worth the time invested to completely assess the disaster, and the community, prior to establishing your service venue.

7.611 Access

Psychosocial services must be easily accessible: they should be located where they are convenient and central to those who will be using them most. The service location must also be an appropriate place for people with illness or physical limitations, such as those who are wheelchair or oxygen dependent. If there is no public transportation to your location, an alternative system of transportation or home visits may be set up. If there are current medical needs associated with the disaster, a link to a medical facility—and ideally one dedicated to the SMTD's health impacts—can be invaluable.

7.612 Stigma

As stated above, people do not typically seek out psychosocial services related to a disaster. Therefore, in deciding where to locate your services, a good strategy is to work in collaboration with others, providing more generally accepted disaster response services. If psychosocial services are normalized as services that everyone receives as part of the disaster response system, people will be less hesitant to use them. Collaborating with other disaster service providers also

provides the opportunity to deliver services such as education, resource referrals, and informal emotional support.

Normalizing psychosocial needs and service utilization, and avoiding stigma, is essential. Your message should be that people utilizing your services are normal people having normal problems associated with this abnormal situation. You will want to be certain that you avoid anything that triggers a negative association when you are deciding on a location for psychosocial services. This could be too boldly associating yourself with the feared and stigmatized arena of mental health, associating yourself with the responsible party, or doing anything that promotes the perception that people who access psychosocial services have severe problems or are somehow deficient.

7.62 Considerations Specific to SMTD:

In deciding where to locate psychosocial remediation services for an SMTD, there are several unique factors to consider.

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7.621 Time Frames

One of the primary factors to consider is the timeframe of the disaster and remediation activities. Due to the long-term nature of SMTD, it is important to locate psychosocial remediation services where they will be accessible over the long haul of the disaster, which could span decades. This may not be practical initially, as such a systemic structure may not be in place yet. However, it is important to keep this factor in mind so that these services can be consistent and convenient for the duration of the disaster to assist with the impacts people will be confronting.

7.622 Factions

It is also important to locate the services in a place that is neutral and not particularly associated with any of the community or agency factions. Avoiding alignment with any particular faction, including any particular religious group or sect, will maximize accessibility to the broadest range of people, regardless of their loyalties or opinions.

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Conclusion

In order to develop effective psychosocial disaster response services, a complete assessment of the community is essential. Educating yourself about the history of the community and the history of the disaster is the logical starting point and provides the foundation on which to build your assessment. The next step involves educating yourself about the various players, and their formal and informal relationships with one another. This leads to identifying and understanding

any factions and conflicts, either between agencies or between different sub-groups of the community.

Once you are aware of these underlying issues, you can then turn your focus to assessing the specific disaster related needs and the community resources available to address these needs. You must identify what resources are already available to meet specific types of needs, and any gaps that might exist due to new, unmet needs emerging from the disaster.

Now that you are knowledgeable about the disaster characteristics and phases covered in Chapter #3, and you have completed your community assessment process, you are now prepared to make an informed choice about where to most effectively locate psychosocial disaster response services. In SMTDs it is especially critical to avoid stigmatization or alignment with any conflicting factions, and to find a location that will be convenient and accessible for the long-term duration of the disaster response.