

RELIEF FOR DISASTER RELIEF WORKERS: STAYING CALM IN A STORM

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This article is about a centering process that transformed my experience as a disaster relief worker. I have learned that it is possible to do this work without experiencing compassion fatigue or burn-out.

I am a clinical psychologist and part of the American Red Cross Disaster Human Services Response Team (DSHR). I am 68 years old. I have assisted at disaster scenes including NYC and Boston following September 11th, the Worcester MA fire, and the Worcester floods. Most recently, I was called to Texas in preparation for Hurricane Ike. This deployment was to last 16 days. I was concerned.

My previous deployments had been much shorter but I was exhausted by the intensity of suffering and my desire to mitigate the psychological pain and physical discomfort all around me. I felt like I was living on the “edges of my skin”, rather than being centered in myself. I was responding to external needs while unresponsive to my own need for sleep, food, water, solace and solitude. Could I survive Hurricane Ike intact?

I have been a practitioner of a centering and healing practice called Intuitive Life Movement™ (ILM) for many years. Intuitive Life Movement™ is a way of “shifting” into mindful awareness of present experience and connecting with an *innate body-based guidance system*. This guidance system is always accessible but is generally out of our awareness. Although ILM brings me instantly into connection with myself, I had never before thought to use it in relief work.

I called my colleague Dr. Shelley Tanenbaum, a psychologist and the creator of ILM and expressed my apprehension about going to Texas. She suggested that I take a few minutes to focus inward and imagine myself in the disaster scene as an invisible observer, while being connected to my body. As an observer, I was able to attend to my own inner state as well as the outer scene and was more clear about how to best serve in that situation.

Shelley then suggested that I imagine myself entering the scene, staying centered by “moving intuitively”, i.e. connected to my inner guidance system. There was a striking difference between how I felt imagining being in the scene while centered in this way, compared to memories of how I had typically felt on a disaster scene. I experienced myself as calmer, more able to focus and accurately assess where I was needed. It seemed like a powerful tool to use but I was unsure if I could maintain the self-possession required, *in vivo*.

A few days later, in a shelter packed with people awaiting the imminent arrival of Hurricane Ike, I took just a moment to employ ILM. I shifted my focus inward, got centered and then went into action. I re-centered between each encounter. Using this strategy, I was able to get through two 18-hour days without getting exhausted. I knew, intuitively, whether I was most needed with clients or with staff, and was able to work effectively through the most tense and fear-filled moments of the storm.

After the storm had passed, and sleep was once again possible, the discipline of centering myself by connecting to my body-based inner guidance prior to each encounter allowed me to be fully available to clients and staff, and to finish out my “tour of duty” without losing my sense of myself, or my physiological and psychological balance. Instead of being burned-out, I was energized and inspired.

In reviewing this transformative experience, it appears that the key elements were:

1. *Imagining myself in the disaster scene prior to arrival, first as an observer and then as if in the scene.* The imagery exercise gave me increased clarity and insight, helped calm my nervous system, and gave me a new body memory of being centered within myself while attentive to outside needs.
2. *Centering and re-centering within my body and myself as often as possible on the scene.* Staying centered using ILM, I could be more responsive to both my own self-care needs and the demands of the situation.

There are many ways to center oneself, such as a simple body scan, deep breathing, yoga and other meditative practices, listening to music and journaling. What I find unique to Intuitive Life Movement is its immediate and profound impact on both mind and body: the mind quiets instantly and a tangible connection to the body is restored. It is learned quickly because it accesses our innate body-based intelligence. While most obvious in the natural grace of young children and animals, ILM has shown me that this way of knowing and being is never lost and is always available to us.

Upon my return home, I found myself applying ILM to additional areas of my own more mundane life, such as preparing holiday meals while being present to the family gathered together, responding to a minor fender-bender, and setting priorities on tasks for the day. I am beginning to incorporate Intuitive Life Movement into teaching Psychological First Aid to other American Red Cross volunteers in my local chapter. The more of us who know how to stay calm in the stormy situations we encounter, the more support we can be to one another.

More information about ILM is available at www.IntuitiveLifeMovement.com or email Shelley@IntuitiveLifeMovement.com The author of this piece can be contacted at anthshande@aol.com