Soon after Hurricane Harvey hit Texas in August, 2017, I came across a memo from the California Psychological Association (CPA) asking for mental health professionals to volunteer services for disaster relief efforts via the Red Cross. As Hurricane Irma was barreling straight for southern Florida, promising to grow into a potentially catastrophic level 4 or 5 event, I decided to volunteer. I felt it was the only means by which I could help as many people as possible in this moment of terrible crisis; while at the same time experiencing the Red Cross firsthand.

I contacted the Red Cross in San Diego and completed an online application and background check before taking a series of extensive on-line trainings aimed at providing mental health disaster relief services. I found I was able to complete all of this in the evenings and over two weekends.

After completing the training, I was flown to Orlando, Florida, and in a moment of self-doubt I honestly wondered what I had gotten myself into. The next day I joined a hundred-plus veterans and first-timers at the staging location where we received our orientation and assignments. A Disaster Mental Health orientation was given by Dr. Bill Martin, the lead person for the mental health volunteers, and several of us were assigned to a gymnasium shelter of roughly 400 residents in the Gulf coast town of Estero, in Lee County. As it was late when we arrived, we spent that evening sleeping on cots in the communal staff room.

The next day, we were teamed with a partner for the duration of our deployment. After spending the morning conducting mental health interventions with shelter residents, my partner Ellen and I were reassigned to another shelter in North Fort Meyers. There we conducted interventions with both shelter residents and its staff of volunteer nurses, police, and various other Red Cross disaster team members. We learned quickly that our assignments were likely to vary on a daily or even hourly basis.

The North Fort Meyers shelter residents were under unusually severe duress, many having been homeless even before Irma struck; some suffered from severe mental illness and had been without medication for days. Others had lost homes, cars, jobs, and contact with family due to Irma’s impact. As the Red Cross was engaged in the response phase of disaster relief, its primary objective was to move everyone, especially the most vulnerable, to a safe place. Emotional duress was not exclusive to the residents; staff volunteers and management alike also struggled with the immensity of the chaos, overwhelming...
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need, and long hours demanded of them to ameliorate the suffering, and Ellen and I conducted interventions among staff and residents alike.

As my partner and I traveled from one location to another, the devastation we witnessed was so profound that in many places the debris piled up along the roadsides high enough to block our view of the homes and businesses behind it. Work trucks for every kind of outreach program, repair, or reconstruction job lined the highways as far as the eye could see in either direction, with crews working around the clock, and dozens of buzzards circled overhead, underscoring the loss of animal life.

The needs of the residents, the relief operation, and indeed, the Disaster Response personnel were constantly changing. Two days after working at the North Fort Meyers shelter, Ellen and I participated in a large, day long media event with other Red Cross volunteers and other agencies, including the Salvation Army, local support and outreach groups, churches, and FEMA. There, we provided information and resources to a continuous line of people, one person after the other, and family after family, broken, frightened, confused, and with needs ranging from food and water, to resources for repairing their homes, finding jobs, and securing cleaning supplies for mold, rats, and other infestations part and parcel of a post-disaster world.

While I worked at the shelters, a few particularly memorable residents left deep impressions on me. One was a man who had been living in Colorado with his wife prior to the hurricane, and flew to Florida on their proverbial “last dime” for the promise of a much needed job. Shortly after arriving, Irma struck and destroyed the business and any hope he had of employment. Meanwhile a 94-year old woman, whose home was destroyed in the storm, had lost contact with her daughter and son. My focus was to help her get into a temporary assisted living situation. She had difficulty processing why she couldn’t go home, and why her children weren’t there to help her. Both cases required a prolonged recovery effort that outlasted my deployment. I offered these and others coping skills and mindfulness practices, along with large doses of compassionate listening, and provision of their most basic needs for survival, including a safe place to sleep to facilitate their ability to manage the immense stress, and loss.

On Friday, September 22nd, Ellen and I were assigned to follow a Red Cross Emergency Response Vehicle (ERV) into the hard hit Lehigh Acres neighborhood. The area looked like a ghost town with very few people out and about, and while the ERV staff made their presence known, my partner and I split up and walked through the devastated neighborhood of broken homes, fallen power lines, snapped trees, and dead vegetation in search of the homebound. The temperature was in the 90s with humidity to match, and the residents had been without power until the day before we arrived. On the final day of our nine-day deployment, Ellen and I went to the Golden Gate neighborhood, just north of Naples in Collier County. The eye the hurricane had passed directly over this town causing flooding and spawning tornados, and the signs of devastation where everywhere, including flood damage, homes missing roofs, walls crumbled to rubble, and residents still without power.
As we made our way to the community center to gather information and assistance for our efforts we spotted a FEMA truck parked in front, and spoke to the people staffing it. They were preparing to leave as they had seen no residents. We asked them to give us a couple of hours to round up some people, then found our way to a trailer park in the center of it all. The residents, mostly Hispanic, were lining up for food being passed out by a local Christian group when we arrived. English speakers in the community guided us to those they knew were in greater need, and reticent to seek help on their own.

We tired rapidly in the heat and humidity, while providing the community with information regarding how and where to obtain food, water, clean up kits, and the possibility of financial assistance, the location of the FEMA truck, and offering an always compassionate ear and encouragement for self care. To our relief, just before we left, another Red Cross team arrived, and along with a local Christian group of volunteers, we helped handing out food, water, clean up kits, and other supplies to the residents.

Returning to the community center, we saw a long line of residents inside, waiting to talk to the FEMA personnel. We set up a table in another area, and assisted residents who required our help. After another hour, we rechecked the FEMA room, and were thrilled to find that it was packed!

Saturday evening arrived, after a nine-day deployment of living in an altered state of reality with very little sense of time, and the next day I would fly back home to San Diego, California. I worried prior to deploying, how I would handle a disaster situation. Now I wondered how I was going to handle returning to an orderly life where needs and wants can be readily met. Odd as that sounds, please consider this: while much of the rest of the country was bickering over whether it is appropriate that an athlete to “take a knee” during the national anthem, or whether entertainers should be boycotted for pointing out flaws in our country, the people I encountered in Florida, residents, and volunteers, were concerned with the well-being of others, and working harmoniously together, their singular goal to help others get back on their feet, regardless of socio-cultural differences. Having been in the throes of disaster recovery, I have seen firsthand the hope, determination, and resilience humans are capable of.

If asked if I would consider volunteering again, my answer is an unequivocal yes. Everywhere I went, I met and worked with selfless people, whose attitude and energy were incredibly and unusually positive, and focused on the welfare of others and moving forward. I believe that what I received far surpassed anything I gave.

With regard to the Red Cross, I have never experienced a more single-mindedly determined group of people, collectively or individually, whose sole mission was to help those in need. Like any large organization, the Red Cross is far from perfect, but having been in the trenches with them and seeing the remarkable work they do, I can’t help but wonder how many people would suffer and potentially die if not for their efforts.

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