

# Leisure activities cultivate hope, resilience in disaster survivors

December 5 2012, by Sharita Forrest

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A volunteer (center) works with a married couple in Ishinomaki, a town in Miyagi prefecture, on reconstructing the garden outside their home after their residence and garden were damaged by the tsunami. Credit: Shintaro Kono

(Medical Xpress)—As survivors of Hurricane Sandy are learning, the emotional toll of natural disasters is as profound as their physical devastation. However, a new study of people who survived Japan's

deadly earthquake and tsunami in 2011 suggests that leisure activities can play critical roles in victims' psychological recovery from natural disasters.

"The magnitude of [natural disasters](#) is often measured by the number of fatalities, but beyond the casualties are family members, neighbors and friends who survived – yet continue to suffer considerably," said Shintaro Kono, a graduate student in recreation, sport and tourism at the University of Illinois and the author of the study, which explored stress coping and leisure behavior among survivors of the earthquake and tsunami that struck northeast Japan on March 11, 2011.

"I saw so many Japanese people struggling from the disaster with [traumatic experiences](#) and many causes of [chronic stress](#)," said Kono, who is from Japan and was visiting a friend in the country's northern region when the earthquake and tsunami struck.

Kono interviewed 16 disaster survivors and five volunteers who worked with them, whom he recruited while working as a volunteer in one of the three prefectures in northeast Japan that suffered the most extensive damage and greatest number of casualties.

Sponsored by the nonprofit organization Make the Heaven, the Megumi-Japan project identified people believed to be at risk of health-related or mental problems. Three to five volunteers worked with each participant in reconstructing their household gardens free of charge, providing survivors with physical and recreational activity as well as regular [social interaction](#). Volunteers also organized other recreational activities for adults who were living in temporary housing and reconstructed and maintained playgrounds for children.

The tsunami survivors' memories of the disaster were harrowing, and the [stressors](#) they shouldered in its aftermath were substantial, including

bereavement and separation from loved ones under uncertain circumstances; extensive damage or complete destruction of their homes and all their possessions; multiple relocations and the strains and difficulties associated with temporary living arrangements, and job losses and economic instability.

"One of the most important factors affecting victims' mental health was the subjective meanings that they attached to their experiences and leisure activities," Kono said. "What is traumatic depends on an individual's personal history, their memories and way of thinking. Home represented not just shelter to many people in this relatively rural area of Japan, but it was the place that all a person's memories were connected to. Therefore, losing their homes was very traumatic for these people."



An elderly survivor looks over the vegetables she is growing outside her room in temporary housing in Minamisanriku. Credit: Shintaro Kono

The Japanese concept of "ikigai," of finding meaning in one's existence, seems to have helped some tsunami survivors cultivate resilience and hope for the future. Focusing on and anticipating leisure activities such as gathering with others to engage in handicrafts, provided some survivors with purpose and motivation to sustain their coping efforts despite overwhelming stress, negative emotions and profound personal losses.

Many of the survivors, most of whom were elderly, engaged in altruistic activities after the disaster in order to repay debts of gratitude and express appreciation for help they had received. However, for some survivors, their post-disaster activities sparked transformative personal growth and the adoption of new purposes in life, especially philanthropic endeavors.

Resuming recreational activities that victims had enjoyed before the disaster aided in their post-disaster coping and psychological recovery in a variety of ways, enabling them to engage in enjoyable, personally meaningful activities; offering opportunities to escape mentally and physically from stressful situations, such as crowded living conditions in temporary housing, and providing activities that people could look forward to with anticipation.

Accessing social support through group leisure activities enabled some people to regain feelings of being in control of their lives by providing opportunities for sharing their feelings and experiences with others so they could begin to heal and move on with their lives.

"Disasters are life-shattering events, and just simple resumption of activities that a person enjoyed before the event provides a sense of continuity and normalcy," Kono said.



Accordingly, even mundane activities that people had found pleasurable before the disaster, such as driving, had powerful psychological meanings for them and elevated their moods when resumed. Getting behind the wheel of a car again restored some people's perceptions of being in control of their lives and fostered feelings of independence, especially for the elderly or disabled.

Using professional or specialized skills that they possessed enabled some survivors to address some of their major post-disaster problems directly and mitigate the related stress, such as when a retired electrician participated in rebuilding his home or when a man who enjoyed do-it-yourself projects constructed storage units for himself and a friend to enhance their accommodations in temporary housing.

However, many survivors' abilities to resume their pre-tsunami leisure activities were severely constrained by the losses they had suffered, and they had to figure out how to negotiate those constraints in order to resume participation in those activities, said Kimberly Shinew, a professor in the College of Applied Health Sciences and Kono's thesis adviser.

A woman who enjoyed traveling but had lost her friends and traveling companions in the disaster discovered that group activities not only provided social support and distraction from her problems but also offered opportunities for cultivating new friendships and potential companions for other shared interests such as travel.

While prior studies have explored the psychological benefits that rebuilt playgrounds offer children in war-torn areas, Kono's study of the 2011 tsunami survivors is believed to be the first research project to explore the role of leisure activities in the psychological recovery of survivors of natural disasters.

The study, which was Kono's thesis for his master's degree at Illinois, was preceded by a pilot study in which he explored leisure activity and coping behaviors among Hurricane Katrina [survivors](#) who were of Japanese ancestry.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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