

Accentuating the positive out of earthquake adversity

February 25 2016



Associate Professor Sarb Johal and researcher Zoe Mounsey from the Joint Centre for Disaster Research.

An innovative study by Massey University researchers explores how nurses have coped in a positive way with the personal and professional

effects of the Canterbury earthquakes.

While there is significant existing research into the negative aspects of disaster on mental health— the researchers say there are few on the positive results for [disaster response](#) and recovery.

The study by clinical psychologist, Associate Professor Sarb Johal, and researcher Zoe Mounsey from Massey's Joint Centre for Disaster Research, addresses the main aspects of what has become known as post-traumatic growth. These are positive experiences arising out of disaster such as improved relationships with others, increased personal strength, identification of new possibilities, positive spiritual change and an increased appreciation of life.

On the fifth anniversary of the fatal Christchurch earthquake Dr Johal and Ms Mounsey present their findings at the 2016 People and Disasters Conference. It is being held in Christchurch to coincide with the very same week the city fell in February 2011.

Two years after that 6.3 earthquake that killed 185 people and caused massive damage to the city's buildings and infrastructure, the researchers interviewed 11 nurses from across the city including those working in community based services, secondary care and residential homes.

Both researchers found differences to an earlier similar study undertaken with Christchurch GPs.

"While doctors appeared to have prepared for their interviews with us, for some of the nurses it was the first time they had sat down and talked about their personal experiences," Ms Mounsey says.

"They were very emotive interviews at times. Up till then they hadn't had a chance to reflect on what the earthquake experience meant for them."

Dr Johal says one of the main questions asked of the nurses who were aged between 49 and 64 at the time of the interviews was "do you feel your relationships with other people have changed."

For many, the magnitude of the disaster was thrown into relief by the realisation of what really mattered to them.

"In a way they've become more detached from events and things but more attached to people," he says.

One comment that seemed to sum up the attitude of a lot of the nurses was: "You have this realisation of what's really important. And it's like an absolute clarification of your values. What really counts are the relationships that you have with your family, your friends and your colleagues."

Since the earthquakes six of the 11 interviewees, who include one male nurse, had changed jobs or their hours.

"Several nurses recognised that they had grown in confidence as a result of their experiences, and that while traumatic it was also rewarding in other ways, while others felt that they were more able to express their emotions, Dr Johal says. "The words that the [nurses](#) used to describe their experiences such as 'incredible,' 'proud' and 'privileged' demonstrate the value that they placed on the experience."

The uplifting nature of the research's conclusion emerged spontaneously from the conversations, he says.

"Nurses do a lot but are not as well recognised as some other sectors."

Dr Johal suspects that the experiences of others working in the emergency services at the time of the earthquake may also now emerge

too.

"After the five year anniversary a lot of people may suddenly come out of the woodwork as the anniversary triggers previously suppressed emotions, thoughts and responses."

Provided by Massey University

Citation: Accentuating the positive out of earthquake adversity (2016, February 25) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-02-accentuating-positive-earthquake-adversity.html>

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