

Coping skills program helps social service workers reduce stress, trauma after disasters

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University of Illinois social work professors Tara Powell and Kate Wegmann found that a mental health intervention called Caregivers Journey of Hope can bolster social service workers' emotional resilience and ability to cope with the stress and trauma associated with disasters such as Superstorm Sandy. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

An intervention called Caregivers Journey of Hope can help social service workers—especially those with the least experience in the field—to mitigate the stress and trauma they may experience when they're helping community members recover from disasters, a new study found.

There's a significant need for mental health interventions for social service workers, who are at high risk of burnout, [chronic stress](#) and emotional distress in disaster recovery, said the study's co-authors, University of Illinois social work professors Tara Powell and Kate M. Wegmann.

"Since many people in helping professions may be trying to rebuild their own lives while helping traumatized people in the community, providing these workers with the training and tools to practice physical, emotional and social self-care is critical to helping them reduce their own stress and avert burnout," said Powell, who led the study.

Powell and her co-authors examined the impact that the Caregivers Journey of Hope workshop had on 722 professionals who assisted victims of Superstorm Sandy in New York and New Jersey.

Sandy ravaged the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S., Canada and the Caribbean during October 2012, killing more than 200 people and causing more than \$70 billion in damage. New York and New Jersey were among the hardest-hit regions on the U.S. mainland, where 87 people died and more than 650,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, according to the study.

Powell co-developed the Caregivers Journey of Hope curriculum while working for Save the Children. The curriculum was designed to bolster the resilience of social workers, teachers and children in New Orleans and reduce [emotional distress](#) they experienced as a result of Hurricane

Katrina in 2005.

Recovery from disasters often takes years, Powell and Wegmann noted in the study. Working closely with traumatized clients and vicariously experiencing their terror and pain can adversely affect the mental health of counselors and social workers.

In turn, this distress can trigger a host of emotional, behavioral, physical and interpersonal problems, negatively affecting caregivers' job performance and personal lives, according to the study.

Obtaining social support can be especially important for counselors because the often-confidential nature of their work prevents them from discussing traumatizing or [stressful experiences](#) outside the workplace, the researchers wrote.

"The half-day Caregivers Journey of Hope workshop gives front-line care providers an opportunity to process disaster-related stress in a safe, confidential environment, build social support and develop strategies to cope with stressors in the workplace and at home," Powell said. "A wealth of research over the past couple of decades has illustrated that higher levels of stress are associated with lower levels of social support."

Working in small groups, workshop participants share their experiences; explore the types, sources and effects of stress; and develop solutions, such as ways they can build their [social support](#) networks. They also discuss strategies for rebuilding their communities and for enhancing individual and community-level recovery.

Powell and Wegmann tested the intervention with social workers and counselors from 37 agencies in New York and New Jersey after Sandy.

Participants reported substantial decreases in their stress levels and

showed significant improvements on all of the other measures surveyed, the researchers found.

Caregivers who were newest on the job—those with one to four years' experience—benefitted the most, showing the greatest gains in their ability to recognize the signs and effects of [stress](#) and in their perceived ability to cope with taxing situations.

"This finding is of particular importance, as those with less experience in the social service field are at a higher risk for experiencing various forms of caregiver distress," Wegmann said. "Research has shown that those who perceive that they can actively cope with stressors or who have higher coping self-efficacy tend to have better health and mental health outcomes."

More information: Tara M. Powell et al, Stress and coping in social service providers after Superstorm Sandy: An examination of a postdisaster psychoeducational intervention., *Traumatology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/trm0000189](https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000189)

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