



Disaster Recovery Begins Before a Disaster

The Importance of Disaster Preparedness

BY LEIA VINCENT AND JENNIFER WEST

The average person spends about 40 percent of the day at work, school or otherwise out of the home according to a 2005 American Time Use Survey from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and life seems to only get busier as time marches on. For 40 percent of each day while not sleeping, we trust that neither we nor our loved ones will suffer harm from the strangers we meet, the forces of nature or the environment within which we work and play. Given the unpredictability of today's events and environment, it is wise to be prepared for tough situations, even those that seem the most unlikely. This first part of our disaster preparedness series targets being ready for disasters occurring while outside the home.

The most visible example is the recent events at Virginia Tech. While there is much speculation about how the crisis was handled, it has left the country mourning and wondering if there was more that could have been done in preparation to possibly prevent 33 deaths on April 16, 2007.

After historic disasters like the Columbine shooting and the World Trade Center terrorist attacks, schools and businesses across America began investigating new safety preparedness protocols and filtering techniques. Dr. Russell T. Jones, who is a Professor of Psychology at Virginia Tech and



conducts research at the Child Study Center at Yale University, and is an expert in trauma, disaster and terrorism. He has dealt with all kinds of disaster, which he divides into categories of natural, or "acts of God," and technological, or man-made. "Disaster preparedness means being equipped to appropriately function both physically and psychologically prior to and during a technological or natural emergency," said Dr. Jones.

A crisis at school has the potential to affect every student and their parents and each member of the faculty, but developing a plan of action can facilitate a rapid, coordinated and effective response when a crisis occurs. "Children don't naturally have the skill mastery to allow them to function at a level of adults in most instances, so they need to be taught early on and reminded throughout life," Dr. Jones advised. His research has shown that the greatest benefit of being prepared is saving lives. Another finding in children practicing disaster preparedness is that it gives them a sense of self-efficacy. Regarding emergency situations and disasters, being prepared enhances confidence in their ability to cope with challenges during such an event.

Psychological education is important to give children the knowledge of what could happen and how they should deal with it. "Teaching them procedures and explaining why each part is vital will make more of an

impression on their mind," said Dr. Jones. He explains the four main steps that should be taken to ensure children and schools are ready for any kind of disaster.

1. Articulate the needs to be addressed in the plan based on the school's vulnerabilities. In-depth explanations are needed to supplement the practice, which Dr. Jones' studies call "elaborative rehearsal." Children are not only taught the procedure and skills, but also the rationale behind the step.

2. Practice, practice, practice!

"Practice makes perfect," said Dr. Jones, repeating the familiar expression. He has been trying for years to get a National Preparedness Day or Week designated as practice days across the country.

3. Evaluate the results of practice drills. After a practice, feedback should be provided on all the different aspects as a way of improving the plan of action.

4. Update the plan based on lessons learned during practice runs, previous incidents and new technologies and science available.

Parents can play an important role in this process as well. It has been shown that children will take plans more seriously with parents involved. Dr. Jones noted, "If parents value preparedness, children will value preparedness because we know that children model the behavior of the parents during and after disasters."

Another aspect of disaster preparedness to consider is how physicians prepare for unforeseen circumstances. Dr. James J. James, MD, director of the AMA Center for Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Response, works to develop comprehensive medical and public health programs that will centralize emergency response in the event of terrorism and other disasters.

In the wake of catastrophic events, practicing physicians may find themselves on both sides of the spectrum, trying to continue providing care to existing patients, while at the same time trying to find their role in overall public response, which may differ from the everyday clinical role, but is just as important. According to Dr. James, the process of developing a crisis plan for a private practice or business is generally the same as the steps listed for school preparedness. One additional aspect, learned from the Katrina experience, is the importance of the need to backup sensitive medical records to maintain the viability of a practice in case of the disaster.



According to Dr. James, there is a lot of work that needs to be done in continuity, planning and assisting physicians in both individual, small, and large practices and hospital environments. The keys to preparedness, said Dr. James, are competency based education and training in planning and public health response while at the same time preparing professionally for the worst. "The ultimate goal is health security in the case of any event, which leads to less mortality, less morbidity, and more lives saved," said Dr. James.

The second and final part of the disaster preparedness series will cover being prepared at home and with your family, and will be featured in the next issue of *AMA Alliance Today* (July/August).

SCHOOL PREPAREDNESS PLAN

Preparedness is the next best thing to prevention in the path of a disaster. Dr. Jones, expert in trauma, disaster and terrorism, has studied children extensively in these emergency situations. "If no plan exists in a school, parents in the community need to step up and volunteer to help create one," said Dr. Jones. Here is a list of the 10 steps that must be completed while developing a school's crisis plan (according to the U.S. Department of Education's Complete Crisis Planning Guide for Schools and Communities):

1. Identify and involve stakeholders, or people who are concerned about the safety of the school and the people who will assist when a crisis occurs.
2. Determine what crises the plan will address, based on the school's vulnerabilities, needs and assets.
3. Define roles and responsibilities of stakeholders. Define what should happen, when and at whose direction to create an organizational system.
4. Develop methods for communicating with staff, students, families and the media. The school needs to create a mechanism to alert students and staff that an incident is occurring and to instruct them on what to do.
5. Obtain necessary equipment and supplies. School staff needs to be provided with the necessary equipment to respond to a crisis, including: master keys, phones or radios, contact information for families, first aid supplies, and possible food and water for students.
6. Prepare for immediate response. When a crisis occurs, it needs to be determined whether everyone needs to be evacuated from the building, returned to the building, or locked down in a classroom.
7. Create maps and facilities information. Information about classrooms, hallways, and stairwells, the location of utility shut-offs, and potential staging sites need to be readily available to staff and emergency personnel.
8. Develop accountability and student release procedures. Staff need to have an efficient way of accounting for all students, staff and visitors.
9. Practice the plan. Preparedness includes emergency drills and crisis exercises for staff, students and emergency responders.
10. Evaluate the efficiency of the plan. Take into consideration the successful and the failed portions of the plan and adapt accordingly.

Log on to www.amaalliance.org for links to a barrage of tips from multiple sources about being prepared for any kind of disaster. Protect your family while they are both home and away.