

DISASTER RESPONSE EDITION

Trauma-Responsive Encounters After Disaster

When Everything Familiar Has Changed

01 The House Was Gone

A survivor stood where her home once stood. A disaster worker began discussing assistance programs. The woman barely responded.

Finally she said, “My mother’s pictures were in there.”

The responder stopped talking about paperwork. “Tell me about your mother.”

For the next several minutes, assistance could wait.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The responder recognized when the practical task needed to pause, and let the conversation go where the survivor needed it to go instead.

What I Was Paying Attention To

She understood that the survivor might be grieving far more than a structure, and paid attention to the one detail that mattered most in that moment, the photographs.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that a house contains memories, identity, history, safety, and belonging, all at once.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Paperwork can usually wait a few minutes. Grief often can’t.
- The detail someone mentions first is often the one that matters most.
- I try to ask about what was lost, not just what needs to be replaced.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Are we responding to the damaged property, or the person standing in front of it?*

02 “Other People Lost More”

A survivor repeatedly said, “I shouldn’t complain. Other people lost everything.”

The chaplain responded, “We can care about what happened to them and still make room for what happened to you.”

The survivor began crying.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The chaplain didn’t allow comparison to erase her experience, even though she was the one minimizing it herself.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He noticed when gratitude was being used to silence grief, and gently made room for both to exist at once.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that suffering does not need to compete for permission to be acknowledged.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Comparison doesn’t have to win. Both things can be true at once.
- Gratitude is sometimes used to silence grief, and I try to notice when that’s happening.
- Everyone’s loss deserves room, regardless of who lost more.

Take a Moment to Reflect *How often do people minimize their own needs because someone else “had it worse”?*

03 The Volunteer Who Finally Sat Down

After days of disaster response, a volunteer kept working. Meals were skipped. Sleep was shortened. Every request received the same answer: “I’ve got it.”

Finally another responder put a bottle of water beside him. “You’ve been taking care of everybody since we got here.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“I know. Sit with me for ten minutes.”

The volunteer reluctantly sat. Only then did he realize how exhausted he was.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

Sometimes supporting the helper meant interrupting the helping. The other responder didn’t ask permission, he simply sat down beside him.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He noticed the person who never asked for anything, and treated that as a signal worth acting on instead of a strength to admire from a distance.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that disaster responders can become so focused on survivors that they overlook their own limits.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- “I’ve got it” isn’t always the whole truth.
- The person who never asks for anything is often the one who needs someone to sit down anyway.
- Supporting the helper sometimes means interrupting the helping, not waiting for an invitation.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Who is checking on the people doing the checking?*