

Innovations in Collaboration: Joint Conference on Psychosocial Support in Disasters

By Daniel Dodgen, Ph.D.



The “Cursos de Verano,” sponsored by the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, are a tradition in Spain that attract thousands of students, educators, and practitioners from across the country. This year I had the privilege of participating in a course, entitled “Psychological Interventions in Disasters: Are We Ready?” This course, developed by Division 6 President Maria Paz Garcia Vera, represented a unique collaboration between the University and Spain’s Ministry of Defense, Military Unit for Emergencies (UME). For a full week, participants focused on the science and practice of psychosocial support during disasters. The military, the Red Cross, researchers, and practitioners all offered insights they had learned from terrorist attacks in Spain and humanitarian missions in other nations. Students were actively engaged in the discussion and their research was represented in the talks.

The Spanish Ministry of Defense provided an overview of the resources they have in responding to disasters, including both material assets and trained mental health professionals. A particular focus of the week was on ways to assess needs during disasters and match interventions to the need in the most appropriate manner. This included a discussion of stress symptoms seen immediately following disasters, as well as the depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorders that can emerge over time. Dr. James Shultz, for example, described “trauma signature

analysis,” which examines the relationship between population exposure to a disaster, physical consequences, and psychological consequences. The analysis provides rapid actionable guidance for effective mental health and psychosocial support tailored to the needs from a specific event. Dr. Jesus Sanz provided an overview of the current research on early interventions. He emphasized the many gaps in current research and the inconsistent support for many frequently-used interventions, with special attention to lessons learned from longitudinal research from victims of terrorist attacks in Spain.



To ensure that the audience understood the gravity and intensity of this work, a simulation was developed for disaster mental health response (see photos). This simulation provided participants the opportunity to experience the reality of working in a large-scale transportation disaster with multiple fatalities and injuries, along with psychological trauma. For many students, and some practitioners, this was the first time they had directly observed the chaos and challenges of being on the scene of such a disaster. This simulation brought to life the issues discussed throughout the week in a way that was as instructive as the excellent presentations.

The conference concluded with a discussion of ways that psychologists can contribute to national and international disaster responses. In addition to their clinical roles in providing mental health support, psychologists are needed to conduct research on topics such as the impact of psychological first aid training and ways to improve all training for emergency responders.

Psychologists can also contribute through their understanding of risk communication and working with vulnerable populations.

The conference served as a great reminder that, as clinical and consulting psychologists, Division 6 members have many avenues through which they can improve preparedness for—and responses to—disasters, terrorist attacks, and other crisis events in their own countries and across the globe.

For more information about this conference, please contact Doctor Maria Paz Garcia Vera at the email address below.

For information on the Complutense University projects in psychology and disasters, go to <http://www.ucm.es/catedrasanchezgey>.

For information on Spain's Ministry of Defense, Military Unit for Emergencies (UME), go to <http://www.ume.mde.es/>.

For information on trauma signature and the work of Dr. Schultz, go to <http://www.deep.med.miami.edu/x7.xml>

=====



Daniel Dodgen

