

## After Katrina: Creativity's Role in Trauma and Growth

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For a number of years, I have been interested in how Creative Problem Solving (CPS) can be applied to aging – especially in people's transition from full-time work to retirement. This is a period in one's life of asking “what next?” and of looking for ways to meaningfully engage in new activities outside of one's working identity.

The residents in the Hurricane Katrina-hit areas are facing this kind of challenge, too – though on a far greater level and in a very different context. Unlike those facing retirement, the hurricane survivors aren't challenged about how to simply adapt one particular aspect of their lives. Rather, individuals, organizations and the community at-large are all asking: How might I completely recreate my own life, while simultaneously recreating my entire community from the ground up?

Transitions, including life after the hurricane, produce many different kinds of needs including:

- The need for finding meaning.
- The need for imagining what could be.
- The need to create real “things” – like houses and roads and bridges in the hurricane area.
- The need to cope with loss and grief.
- The need to connect with others.
- The need to examine one's multiple identities.

This entire process and search is a creative act. And thriving in one's post-hurricane life – like thriving in retirement – is a challenge of the imagination.

Rebuilding one's personal life OR community can be a monumental task. Doing them both at the same time might strain even the most strong-willed individuals.

### CREATIVE GROWTH OUT OF TRAUMA

Psychologists have already warned that the risk of post-traumatic stress syndrome is a very real possibility for the inhabitants of these hurricane-hit areas. Yet, the possibility of post-traumatic GROWTH exists, as well.

University of North Carolina researchers Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun have suggested that allowing a distressed person “to regain the ability to cognitively engage the aftermath of the trauma in a rather deliberate fashion will promote the possibility for post-traumatic growth.”

This raises the question about whether there are deliberate interventions that might help people cope with the stress and transitions in a meaningful way. Are there ways for individuals to come out the other side not just experiencing an overwhelming sense of grief and loss – but also, as Tedeschi and Calhoun suggest, for them “to begin to formulate new goals and to revise major components of the assumptive world in ways that acknowledge their changed circumstances.”

All of this made me wonder what role Creative Problem Solving can play in helping these people “imagine could be” in their lives. CPS skills can be learned and applied by both children and adults. In general, CPS can increase people's skills and abilities to:

- Generate possibilities.
- Defer judgment about how to approach one's problem situation.
- Adapt to a constantly changing environment.
- Redefine the problems one faces.
- Gain a sense of control.
- See opportunities, in addition to problems.
- Experience a sense of hope.
- Think paradoxically.

These will be necessary skills for successfully transitioning to the next phase of life in the hurricane areas.

None of this, of course, discounts the stress, pain and trauma that will be experienced by many, if not all, of the people affected by the hurricane. It is not meant to suggest that creativity will – or should – eliminate people's losses. As Tedeschi and Calhoun remind us, “a focus on growth should not come at the expense of empathy for the pain and suffering of trauma survivors.”

Rather, CPS adds a positive intervention that can potentially help some people transition through this process in a healthier and less traumatic way. CPS can provide people with a process for experiencing hope in a positive future and for deliberately creating that future for themselves and their community.

#### **WOULDN'T IT BE NICE: THE CREATIVITY COMMUNITY RESPONDS**

The first steps of the CPS process begin with an exploration of hopes, wishes and goals. This search helps deepen the understanding of the challenge or problem that one seeks to solve. One way of phrasing this search is “wouldn't it be nice if ...”.

Lately, I've found myself using this phrase repeatedly in my mind. I keep asking myself: Wouldn't it be nice if the creativity community could help the victims of Hurricane Katrina apply Creative Problem Solving to reimagine their individual and collective futures?

Ultimately, individual future visions will need to connect with other people's visions to find a shared purpose for recreating the broader community. To do this alone is difficult – under any circumstances. Doing this in a guided and deliberate way significantly increases the odds of creating an engaged and meaning-filled new community.

Margaret Wheatley says that “we cannot cope, much less create ... without each other. There is no substitute for human creativity, human caring, human will. We can be incredibly resourceful, imaginative, and open-hearted.”

Like in any crisis or natural disaster, some people will come out the other end flourishing and transformed. For others, the experience will produce on-going anxiety, depression or other pathological outcomes.

If creative thinking and problem solving can possibly help more people experience a sense of hope, cope better with the multitude of changes and transitions, become more resilient, and ultimately improve their well-being – shouldn't we at least try to make this happen?

*Dahlberg's work focuses on applying creativity to improve the well-being of individuals, organizations and communities.*

#### **More on this topic:**

- [Posttraumatic Growth: A New Perspective on Psychotraumatology](#)  
*By Richard G. Tedeschi, Ph.D., and Lawrence Calhoun, Ph.D. in Psychiatric Times, April 2004*
- [Managing Traumatic Stress: After Hurricane Katrina](#)  
*From the American Psychological Association*
- [Pathways to Posttraumatic Growth](#)  
*Paul T. P. Wong, Ph.D., Trinity Western University*
- [Natural Disaster: Devastating Effects of Hurricane Katrina - Post-Traumatic Stress and Mental Health Information](#)  
*National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*
- [Donate to the American Red Cross](#)