

New Mental Health Institute helps people deal with disaster

'BE KIND. BE CALM. BE THERE. SHOWING UP IS A BIG PART OF IT.'

— James Halpern,
professor of psychology at SUNY New Paltz

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New Paltz — Floods, fires, hurricanes, accidents, blizzards. Disasters seem unending.

In their wake, they leave wounded minds as well as deprivation and discomfort. The need is there. So is help.

"Be kind. Be calm. Be there. Showing up is a big part of it." That is what James Halpern tells students in the newly formed Disaster Mental Health Institute at SUNY New Paltz.

"It is not only about material things that are lost," Halpern said this week. "We are dealing with people in shock, people who have been traumatized by having their world pulled out from under them.... Many people are able to bounce back on their own. But some people do experience a vast amount of stress they could use help with."

Halpern has seen it up close.

He led the first organized mental health team to Ground Zero in the wake of Sept. 11. He escorted family of deceased firefighters to Ground Zero at night. He helped victims after the recent flooding in Westbrookville. After Hurricane Ivan dumped torrential rains on the East Coast, Halpern spent 12 days assisting victims in western Pennsylvania.

The Institute has grown out of Halpern's interest and



James Halpern

involvement in disaster mental health services, particularly with the American Red Cross. He is on the Red Cross's mental health leadership services committee in the greater New York area. He is also coordinator of disaster mental health services for Orange, Putnam, Rockland and Sullivan counties.



Gerald Benjamin

Gerald Benjamin, dean of the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at SUNY New Paltz, saw an opportunity to build on Halpern's strengths and suggested the institute. "I think we have something unique," Benjamin said.

Not only does the institute open a potentially ripe area of growth, but it fits into the university's mission of public service, Benjamin said. Through conferences and workshops, Halpern said the services will reach area emergency responders, paraprofessionals, firefighters, clergy and the like. Students will have a chance to minor in disaster mental health studies. Courses will cut across the curriculum, spanning political science, sociology, psychology, communications, nursing and anthropology.

"Students really want an opportunity to have an impact,"

Halpern said. They will get their chance; students will intern with area Red Cross organizations to get a taste of real disasters, Halpern said.

Nationwide, the Red Cross responds to about 50,000 disasters annually, Halpern said.

The disasters don't have to be huge. A house fire can leave people with nothing. "We supply emotional first aid," Halpern said. Even if someone appears to have a tight grip on their stress, anger and frustration can grow over time.

Virginia Ashworth has seen it happen.

Swollen by rain, Pine Kill Creek swallowed the 40-foot bridge that connects her to the world. One estimate to replace it: \$100,000. Now they are looking to borrow a portable walking bridge from the Army.

"It's difficult for my husband. He had a heart attack in April. I just completed chemo and had surgery this week. ... But I am pretty stoic. ... A lot of people around here don't have any heat. That would be depressing."

She went to a meeting with officials to find out what government could do to help, but no agency was offering money. One woman was crying. "She has children. Her husband doesn't have a job. Their trailer was flooded and condemned and they are living in a motel," Ashworth said. "In her circumstance, she would need somebody to talk to."

There is hope, Halpern said. "People are resilient. We need to respect the fact that people, with time, will heal. But in the meantime, we can offer them some support."