

Disaster Mental Health Field Work Enhanced by Animal-Assisted Crisis Response

“Rapport enhances life. Rapport is the medium through which care flows.” I have worked in the mental health field for 35 years. I *cut my teeth* in Disaster Behavioral Health with the Mental Health Function of the Red Cross at Ground Zero in NYC and Liberty Park, NJ in the aftermath of 911. But it wasn't until my involvement with the Green Cross in Oso and Darrington, WA, this month that I witnessed firsthand the powerful adjunct of an Animal-Assisted Crisis Response team, namely, a registered therapy dog with much more training, alongside the human handler.

Being 'paired' with a crisis response dog team greatly facilitates what I call *“rapid rapport.”* The dog is a magnet of celebrity-like attraction, *opening doors and hearts*, which promotes the human-to-human encounter of care and compassion. Again and again in Oso and Darrington a small group of first responders and/or survivors spontaneously gathered around each dog with the handler coaching them about the dog's role. This allowed me time to *triage* the cluster of people, noting signs of distress often manifesting through how each person responds to the dog. From there the conversations that proceed, in my experience, take as little as a quarter of the time for the care-receiver to share what's on his/her heart. The rapid rapport building and subsequent care delivered through the presence of the canine-assisted process is stunning. *The equation looks like this:*

Disaster Stress Caregiver + Animal-Assisted Crisis Response Team = Rapid Rapport

For example, during the Oso Tribute on 4/26/2014, an event thanking first responders, a young man and his pre-school aged daughter approached Bungee (a chocolate Labrador), handled by Raquel Lackey – the crisis response dog team I was deployed with that day. The dad initially did not interact on his own behalf with me or any other human (as far as I could tell) as he focused on his daughter's approach to the dog. After about a minute, I struck up a conversation with him, initially about our shared experience of the dog at that moment. Within another minute, he shared how he grew up in Oso, now lives in a neighboring town, and helped with rescue and recovery efforts the first week after the Slide. *“I've never been so humbled in my life,”* he disclosed, as he then shared his abbreviated *life review*. I don't know if this was the first he shared of his experience, but it appeared to bolster him as he disappeared into the crowd under the tent. Bungee's presence naturally created *the setting to sow (or create) hope*.

These highly trained dogs are a treasure. Not only are more people reached through their presence; the potential quality of each human interaction is enhanced. *Sharing a crisis response dog experience together is like sharing a meal. Defenses are lowered. Care is enhanced through open hearts.* I hope disaster recovery going forward will include these dogs where appropriate. I'm a believer!

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