

«Faced with the consequences of a disaster of this magnitude, there are no good decisions, there are only less bad decisions»



Lucy Easthope is the UK's leading authority on disaster recovery. She has advised on almost every major disaster of the last two decades, including the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, 9/11, the 7/7 London bombings and the Salisbury and Grenfell poisonings. She has recently advised the UK Prime Minister's Office on the Covid-19 pandemic. Born in Liverpool (UK), Easthope has a law degree, a medical doctorate and a master's degree in risk, crisis and disaster management.

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1.- Over the years you have had to deal with different catastrophes, what have you learned from them? Do you think there is a collective loss of awareness of the real danger?

In any disaster, the focus must be on accompanying the victims. In addition to responding to the urgent, this response must be sustained over time. Once the disaster disappears from the media spotlight, people often experience a feeling of abandonment. At first, victims may feel supported by the solidarity that arises in the face of a disaster, but this feeling tends to fade over time, once people become aware of the loss or damage suffered. For this reason, in addition to specific aid depending on the type of disaster, emotional support is needed to enable those affected to get back to their lives. Many of these people have to face situations for which no one is prepared.

On the other hand, to be aware of a danger, you have to know about it. Lack of information is very dangerous and can have a significant impact on the scale of a tragedy. We can all be reckless at any given moment, making us more vulnerable to danger. For this reason, it is essential to have the necessary information to be able to deal adequately with certain situations that allow us to take measures to mitigate the impact of a tragedy, as well as to manage the damage caused by the consequences of misinformation and errors that may occur.

2.- Whenever there is a tragedy like the DANA that has affected Spain, we always wonder if it could have been avoided. What do you think is the main mistake that is made in a disaster?

The Isolated High Level Depression (DANA) that has affected different regions of Spain has been a devastating situation, which highlights the importance of acting in a coordinated manner and providing immediate but also long-term assistance to the victims. There are people who have not only had to deal with the pain of losing a loved one in such circumstances, but have also had their homes or jobs seriously affected. It is not possible to prevent a DANA, but it is possible to provide the necessary assistance to try to restore what is possible, reducing the consequences. Floods are very difficult disasters to overcome because of the human losses. They are also extremely costly in economic terms. Prevention begins long before we know that such a phenomenon is going to occur. A mistake that I consider to be very common in this type of situation is, on the one hand, the lack of coordination between institutions and, on the other hand, the absence of expert advice.

Faced with the consequences of a disaster of this magnitude, there are no good decisions, there are only less bad decisions. It is not a matter of living in fear, but of being aware that there are situations that can occur. Citizens must be provided with the relevant tools so that they can deal with them in the best possible way. Efficient coordinated assistance and information are important tools to provide certainty and to cope with such tragedies.

There are actions we can take to make a positive contribution. We can make financial donations, which is what is most needed at this time, contribute by spending on local businesses or activities that have been affected, or provide the means for children to enjoy 'some normality' by returning to school or playing sports.

3.- How should professions and institutions act in order to be able to help and accompany people affected by a disaster from the moment it occurs until months or years later?

As I mentioned earlier, accompaniment is essential for people to be able to get back to their lives. We need to take a long-term view that goes beyond the initial assistance. At the beginning, there is an effect in which everyone turns their attention to the victims, but other incidents or the passage of time itself gradually divert attention to other issues, tending to forget or minimise the damage. Institutions and professionals need to be aware that the pain suffered by these people will probably accompany them for the rest of their lives, so help must go where the people affected are. For this reason, although responses must be adapted according to the type of disaster, it is very important to exercise empathy and for institutions to make themselves available to those who are suffering in order to respond to the personal, emotional, social or economic needs that will truly allow them to move forward.

Adopting a preventive approach is very important in the face of any type of disaster. States must have specific action plans to deal with different scenarios by coordinating the various institutions and actors that can cooperate. The people affected must not feel abandoned by those who must take the lead, local authorities with state support. Similarly, in the case of professionals, it would be interesting for them to be taken into account in the framework of this type of plan, in order to be

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able to respond effectively to the professional accompaniment that can alleviate specific issues that need to be dealt with or managed in this type of situation. It is also essential that there is collaboration between institutions and professionals in order to provide assistance that takes into account different perspectives. We have to take care of each other to the best of our ability.

4. - Climate change will make natural disasters more and more frequent. How should we prepare for this reality? What changes do we need to make as a society?

We have to accept the new climate reality we are facing. Climate change will mean that we will face more and more frequent extreme events. Our aim as a society must be to mitigate as much as possible the impact of sometimes unavoidable events. It is therefore very important to bring about a change in mentality, and education is an important way to achieve this. The education system must include in its programmes a series of tools that provide people with the necessary knowledge to respond in the best possible way to extreme situations. It is important that we begin to see prevention as an investment, being the best alternative to avoid damage that may be irreparable.

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