

Bartenders and Hairdressers As Natural Helpers After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11

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Question: Why were professional mental health services apparently underutilized after 9/11, and did people receive emotional support from alternative sources?

Approach: Bartenders and hairdressers in New York City were surveyed by telephone to evaluate their role as natural community helpers.

Abstract

Objective: Pathological emotional responses to trauma can paradoxically lead to reluctance to engage in treatment. Some people may feel more comfortable discussing emotional reactions with members of the community, such as bartenders or personal service providers, who are referred to as “natural helpers,” and can serve as de facto care givers. The purpose of this study was to learn more about the role of these helpers and their reactions following the attacks of 9/11.

Method: A brief questionnaire was developed. Bartenders and hairdressers were contacted by telephone during June and July of 2002, and asked how the 9/11 attacks affected their business, their interactions with customers, and whether they suffered adverse reactions to filling the role of natural helper in a disaster environment. Librarians were used as a control.

Results: 37 bartenders, 48 hairdressers, and 48 librarians agreed to participate in the study. Compared to librarians, significantly more hairdressers and bartenders reported that their customers wanted to talk about their emotional reactions to the attacks, that it was difficult for them to talk to so many people about this topic, and that they tried to avoid the topic with others because of so much exposure at work.

Conclusions: Bartenders and hairdressers reported an increased desire among their customers to talk about emotional topics following the 9/11 attacks, and experienced some adverse emotional effects.

Context

Terrorism is a psychological weapon. Terrorists seek to intimidate societies and governments through the use of violence calculated to produce maximal fear and distress. Although any disaster that causes loss of life can be emotionally traumatic, intentional, human-caused disasters appear to lead to a higher incidence of trauma-related mental distress than natural disasters of comparable magnitude. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 constituted the worst peacetime catastrophe in U.S. history, and had serious emotional effects on large numbers of people.

Project Liberty, funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, was initiated as a large-scale public mental health program as part of New York State’s response to this disaster. After six months, however, Project Liberty reported that most affected adults did not see themselves or their family members as having psychiatric or mental health problems, and relatively few sought or used traditional mental health services.

Patients at risk for the development of PTSD often suffer from acute stress symptoms that include social withdrawal and avoidance of situations that arouse recollections of the trauma, behaviors that may lead to reluctance to engage in treatment. Formal treatment by a mental health professional, however, is not the only option available to individuals struggling to cope with the effects of severe stress.

Natural Helpers

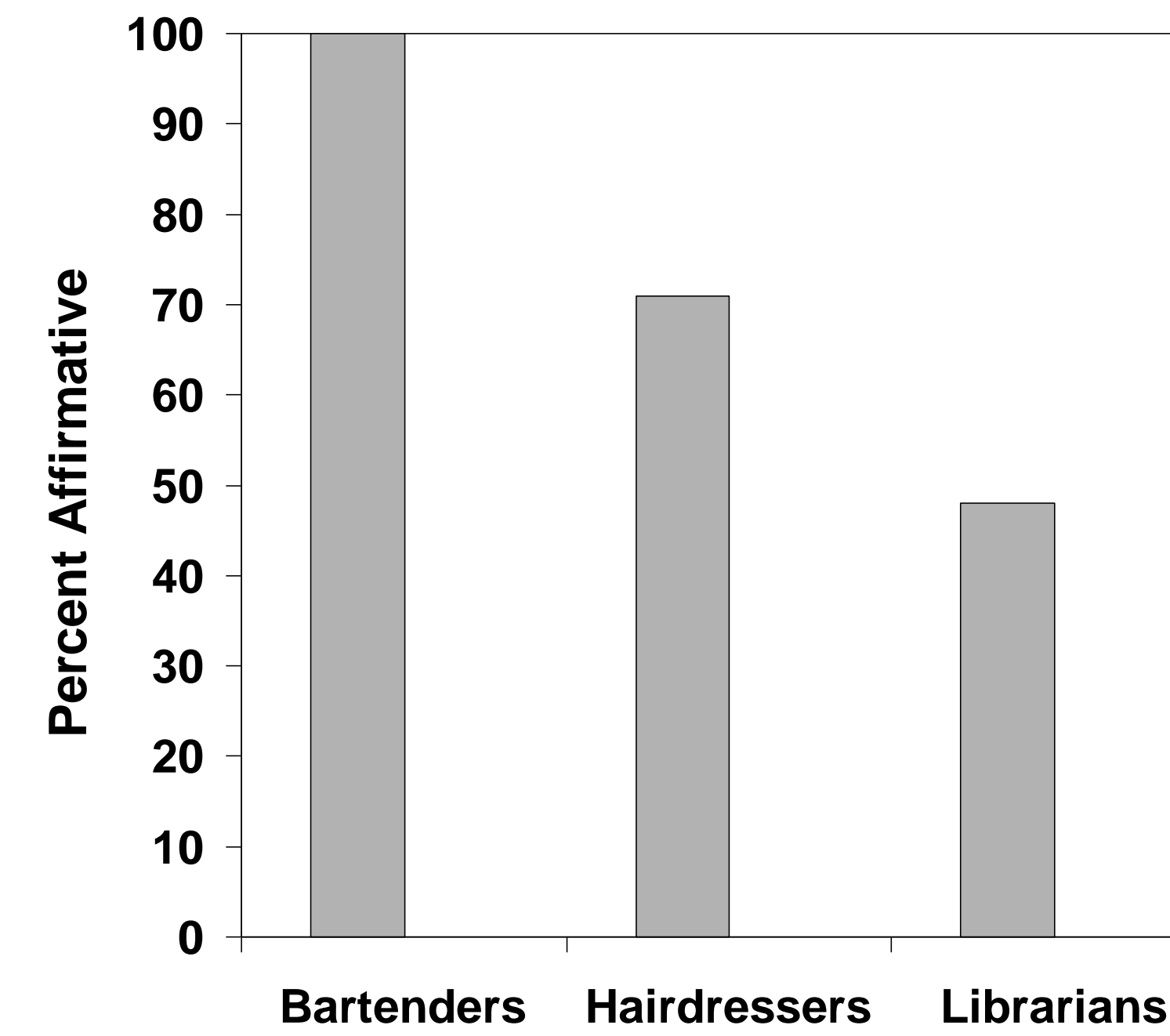
Bartenders: Have been used to increase awareness of the risks of unsafe drinking, and to reduce the risk of HIV transmission.

Hairdressers: Serve as emotional supports primarily for women. Hairdressers have been used to provide information on available resources to victims of domestic violence.

Librarians: Used as a control. Librarians in the same geographic location were exposed to the same environment, but traditionally do not serve as confidantes to their patrons

Results

Did Customers Want to Discuss Their Feelings About 9/11?



Was It Difficult To Discuss 9/11 With So Many People?



	Hairdressers (n=48)	Bartenders (n=37)	Librarians (n=48)	p< hairdressers vs librarians	p< bartenders vs librarians
Business increased after 9/11	4%	46%	21%	0.001	0.05
Business stayed the same after 9/11	21%	27%	54%		
Business decreased after 9/11	75%	27%	25%		
It was hard to stop thinking about 9/11 at home	54%	65%	71%	ns	ns
Did not want to go to work because of association with 9/11	27%	22%	17%	ns	ns
Did not go to work because of association with 9/11	31%	6%	15%	p=.052	ns
Avg. number of days of work missed because work associated with 9/11	1.62	0.19	0.38	0.001	ns
Avoided topic of 9/11 with friends and family due to high exposure at work	25%	30%	8%	0.05	0.01
Interested in information on how to provide emotional help to customers after a disaster	38%	62%	23%	ns	0.001
Number of years in occupation	24	12	14		

Conclusions

Helping a community following a disaster is challenging because of the large number of people affected, and because some traumatized individuals avoid the traditional mental health system. Only treatment by a mental health professional can provide appropriate care for frank posttraumatic stress disorder; however an informal network of natural helpers may be a valuable resource for victims who have less severe responses, or for those who are unwilling to see a traditional mental health professional.

Close to one half of the hairdressers and bartenders surveyed reported that it was difficult for them to talk about 9/11 with so many people. They also reported negative reactions, including avoiding work because of the association with the terrorist attacks, and wanting to avoid the topic of the attacks with friends and relatives as a result of so much exposure at work.

Identifying ways to assist natural helpers increase their effectiveness with their customers, while diminishing negative reactions that they may experience as a result of their role, may be useful in planning for future disasters.