

## Emphasizing Multi-faceted Self Care to Puerto Rican Communities Post-Hurricane Maria

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*Abstract*

Six months post-hurricane Maria, a group of 20 Andrews University students and faculty went on a Mental Health mission trip to Puerto Rico. Students and faculty from the Social Work department presented various techniques of self-care for adults and children, on a physical, emotional, social, and spiritual levels.

*Keywords:* natural disaster, self-care, first responders, mental health

**Summary***Literature and Background*

Hurricane Maria became Puerto Rico's strongest storm in 85 years. When a group of Andrews University students from the Social Work Department heard about and accepted the challenge to address the mental health needs of the first responders in light of this disaster, they were only thinking of one kind. Typically when we hear the term "first responder", we automatically think of official titles like 'firefighter', 'paramedic', 'police officer', and perhaps even 'FEMA' or the 'National Guard.' However, there is a group of unofficial first responders comprised of community members. These are the individuals who step up during and after a disaster to lend their strength towards recovery efforts. Attention always goes first toward essential basic needs: food, clean water, shelter, and medication. However, a piece that is often forgotten is that of mental health. According to Puerto Rico's Department of Health, the year 2017 ended with a 29% increase in suicides (Government of Puerto Rico, Health Department, 2017). This is a recorded new high after years of steady decrease (Government of Puerto Rico, Health Department, 2017).

Self-care is vitally important for first responders and community members after a natural disaster. Without self-care, first responders – official or unofficial – will eventually succumb to burnout and secondary traumatic stress. The Center for Disease Control (2018)

lists sadness, poor self-care, isolation and addiction to substances as a few of the signs of burnout. This can significantly dampen recovery efforts.

### *Methods*

During spring break in March 2018, a group of twenty faculty, staff, and students went on a Mental Health Mission Trip to the island of Puerto Rico. This mission trip was the first of its kind. From the Andrews Department of Social Work there were two faculty, and five Masters' (MSW) students included in that number. Our psychoeducation efforts geared towards officials, first responders, and community members were based on empirical knowledge regarding the risk factors for depression, addiction, and PTSD. Psychoeducational presentations were given 30 locations on the island at several schools, multiple churches, a disaster distribution site, college chapel, and government offices. The theme presented for the trip was "Acepta, Habla, Sana", Spanish for Accept, Talk, Heal.

MSW students and faculty focused primarily on the importance of self-care. The audience members were encouraged to share what they do to take care of themselves physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Additional ideas and techniques were shared by the MSW students. For example, social support was highly encouraged for children because lower levels of social support directly influenced the increase in risk for depression. Children and adults alike, were taught how to conduct simple breathing techniques to address emotional self-care. Additionally, time was spent addressing those who held religious beliefs in order to increase positive religious coping. Adults with negative religious coping are more likely to report depressive symptoms as a response to trauma (Chen & Koenig, 2006).

### *Results*

A rough estimate reports that around 1,000 individuals were reached through these presentations. In addition, sermons were broadcast on television and interviews were conducted on the radio reaching untold thousands more. Those reached unanimously

verbalized appreciation for the information shared, and wanted to know when we were coming back. We were told no one else had given this type of assistance, as mental health was a neglected part of the recovery effort.

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