YOUR 2-YEAR-OLD CAN READ. SHOULD YOU BE WORRIED?

BY PRISCILLA GILMAN
Connecting the Dots

Too Much Trauma
Another massive earthquake shook Japan last week. How much can one nation take?

By George A. Bonanno

FIRST JAPAN WAS hit by a triple whammy. The country of 127 million has just endured one of the largest earthquakes in recorded history, followed by a shockingly voracious tsunami. Together, these two brutes of nature wreaked havoc on the towns and villages of the northern Japanese coastline. If only the damage had stopped there. When the deadly combo of earthquake and tsunami breached the protective barriers and engulfed one of Japan's oldest nuclear-power plants, a nuclear nightmare began, one that at this point has shown no clear signs of ending.

Then last Thursday a 7.4 quake hit, knocking out power for more than 3 million, and again shaking the country to its core. How could any nation bear so much?

The simple fact is that the Japanese archipelago is no stranger to cataclysmic events. Over time, the Japanese have endured more than their share of devastating natural disasters. As a people, they have always coped remarkably well—so well, in fact, we are left wondering if there isn't something especially resilient about them. In fact, the Japanese are the only people on this planet to fully confront the horror of nuclear destruction, and to survive it. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki near the end of World War II has become the archetypal nightmare of our time. Strangely, those events share some striking similarities with the recent compound disaster.

The sun shone brightly in Hiroshima on the morning of Aug. 6, 1945. Its citizens were just beginning their day when at 7 a.m. an air-raid siren sounded. It was wartime, so bombing was hardly unexpected. Most people were not especially worried. By 8 a.m. the all-clear was given, and people went back to their business. Minutes later the first nuclear weapon ever dropped on a civilian population exploded in a blinding, noiseless flash. Some 40,000 people were killed instantly. Many others were burned beyond recognition. The power of the blast was so strong it literally tore people's clothing off and flattened buildings as if they were made of cardboard. As the stunned nation began to dig itself out, sporadic fires appeared. At first the fires were isolated—one here, one there. But soon the heat and air movement whipped the
flames into a consuming blaze. It was a scene straight out of hell, and it still wasn’t over. Thousands more perished in the days that followed. Many of those who survived the initial blast later succumbed to nightmarish afflictions: bleeding, ulceration, and worst of all the ghastly consequences of radiation sickness.

Psychological trauma was not a familiar concept in those days. After a disaster, scientists did not rush to collect data. Mental health professionals did not flood the area offering crisis counseling. However, many survivors kept diaries. And surprisingly, because of the unknowns surrounding nuclear weaponry, the U.S. military conducted a large-scale survey. The resulting information offers a resounding portrait of the resilience of the Japanese people.

The city of Nagasaki was also bombed. Military journalist George Weller was there soon afterward. His dispatches, recently discovered, tell us that within a month of the blast the incoming trains were already jampacked with returning survivors. Few had any possessions to speak of. Yet they were returning to their shattered city en masse to stake out their former homes, to plant gardens, and to begin life anew.

A remarkable tenacity, but is it unique to the Japanese? In fact, overwhelming evidence from natural and man-made disasters shows that all peoples—not just the Japanese—seem to be able to endure just about anything nature throws their way. There is a cost, to be sure. Disasters cause trauma reactions. They cause depression and grief and anxiety, and they increase the prevalence of illness and physical problems. But this harm is not nearly as pervasive as you might expect. My colleagues Chris Brewin, Krys Kaniasty, and Annette La Greca and I recently concluded that, at their maximum impact, no more than 30 percent of a population exposed to disaster will suffer enduring psychological problems. That’s still a lot, but most of the time the totals are considerably lower. Some people struggle for a period and then recover. Sometimes people struggle but only keep getting worse. In almost every case, however, wherever adequate research evidence was available, we found that the most common response to disaster was a speedy recovery and no lasting psychological harm.

In short, resilience.

How do we do it? The science is not all there yet, but the best explanation is that we are wired for it. Because disasters are so hugely threatening, they activate our most primitive brain regions. We can’t help but experience intense fear and distress. We panic. We focus. We flee, or we go numb. These reactions are natural. We are designed to have them, and they are wonderfully effective in helping us mobilize our defenses and deal with threat. The initial jolt usually lasts anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours to a few days. Once it subsides, most of us can begin to take stock. We assess the danger and the damage, and we regroup. Most of the time we find we are going to be OK.

Even after the most earth-shattering disasters this holds true. Although the 9/11 attacks stunned New York City, the psychological trauma there was relatively short-lived. Of course, there were cases of posttraumatic stress disorder and other severe reactions after the attack. But by the time several months had passed, the prevalence of psychological trauma was surprisingly low. New Yorkers were busy pulling the city back together. The same was true in London after the Blitz of World War II, in Southeast Asia after the terrible tsunami of 2004, and in countless other disasters for as long as we’ve been enduring them.

Is that all there is to it, then, for the Japanese? Unfortunately, no. One of the looming difficulties in the crisis in Japan is that it just doesn’t seem to want to end. The problems at the nuclear power plant have continued. There have also been repeated aftershocks and smaller earthquakes that have compounded recovery efforts and inflicted even more damage.

A different kind of problem is the growing mistrust of the government. The administration in Tokyo has consistently failed its people by providing confusing and often inaccurate information about the extent of the damage. They have also been frustratingly vague about the possible dangers of radiation contamination. This does not help. Studies of the SARS epidemic of 2004, for example, demonstrated that providing the public with realistic information about both risk and recovery helps reduce worry and fear and promotes community action. When the opposite happens, when the chips are down and a nation feels betrayed by its leaders, the results can be caustic. Government mistrust after disaster erodes morale, disintegrates community, and, as Dutch trauma researcher Berthold Gersons and his colleagues have observed, leads to a sense of “collective secondary victimization” that if unchecked can create a “second disaster.”

How long can the Japanese endure? Relief and recovery have been slow. The Japanese have survived earthquakes and tsunamis. They have survived Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Humans are inherently resilient, and the Japanese just may be among the most resilient of all. But the sobering fact is that there are limits to human endurance. When adversity is relentless, when we are confronted with repeated casualties, repeated emergencies, endless streams of bad news, our ability to respond does begin to break down.

Let’s hope that doesn’t happen in Japan. Let’s hope for some good news and fast. 

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