

MY VIEW

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LOOK FOR THE HELPERS

Recently I read an article by Mister Rogers, the beloved well known host of PBS's Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood who died in 2003. He recounted that when he was a boy and would see scary and tragic things in the news his mother Nancy would say to him: "**Look for the helpers. You will always find people helping.**" What Nancy Rogers was suggesting to her son is that the antidote for the negative effects of seeing upsetting things is to focus on "the good people doing good things." For those of us in TIP and in public safety who see disturbing sights and sounds regularly, I say, "*Right on Mrs. Rogers! We need to embrace your advice.*"

For 45 years as a mental health professional and in TIP, I have been exposed to human pain and tragedy over and over again. For most of that time I have not had access to the support programs available today (debriefings, peer support, etc...). However, I have unknowingly been following the advice of Nancy Rogers....**look for the helpers.** Fortunately I haven't had to look very far for the helpers. I have been surrounded by them. They are called TIP Volunteers. Getting to know these helpers and listening to their "helping stories" has more than anything else helped me develop the resilience needed in my career.

One of the most common questions I'm asked about is "**How can TIP Volunteers go into very tragic situations and not "burn out" or suffer lasting emotional wounds?**" No doubt, there are a number of reasons. But a major one is that they, like me, are surrounded by helpers... other TIP Volunteers. They see their fellow volunteers on a regular basis doing good for others. Also, we train our volunteers when they respond to TIP calls to "**look for the helpers.**" Fortunately, they always seem to find them...family members, friends, neighbors, strangers and first responders.

I'm convinced that our volunteers' regular exposure to other helpers both within the volunteer team and on TIP calls is a major reason they are able to confront awful situations and come away unscathed.

Of course our partners in public safety and in hospital emergency departments are exposed to far more human suffering and tragedy than are TIP Volunteers. Is Mrs. Rogers advice "**Look for the helpers**" relevant to them? I think so. Unless responders look for the helpers in the disturbing situations they encounter they are in danger of becoming cynical, judgmental, numb and eventually burned out. And here is where I think TIP plays a role in contributing to the resiliency of our first responder partners. We continually expose them to helpers...TIP Volunteers. Our volunteers have become part of the emergency response system and are a constant reminder to responders that there are good people willing to help in bad situations.

There are many efforts by emergency agencies and hospitals to develop programs (debriefing, peer counseling, chaplains...) which protect first responders and healthcare professionals from suffering lasting emotional wounds. These are important programs which I wholeheartedly support. But let's remember Nancy Roger's easily practiced and simple advice regarding dealing with disturbing situations...**look for the helpers**.

To implement the "**look for the helpers**" advice we don't need a program with a fancy name (Helpers Exposure Therapy...HET :-). We just need to regularly remind ourselves and each other of the importance of expanding our perception of the tragic events we see to include the helpers who are there. This will help us appreciate that while at times "the world goes wrong" there are always helpers there to soften the blow and to help those affected.

Of course we can implement the "**look for the helpers**" principle in our personal lives. When our children see something disturbing in the media (it's likely) we can advise them "**look for the helpers. You will always find people helping.**" For example, it's hard to watch the news these days without seeing the horrors in Syria. When our children see these images of death and destruction we can point out the White Helmets, volunteers dedicated to extracting victims from bombed buildings (as profiled on CBS'S 60 Minutes).

Helpers are a godsend. When tragedy strikes we need to look for them. They are always there.