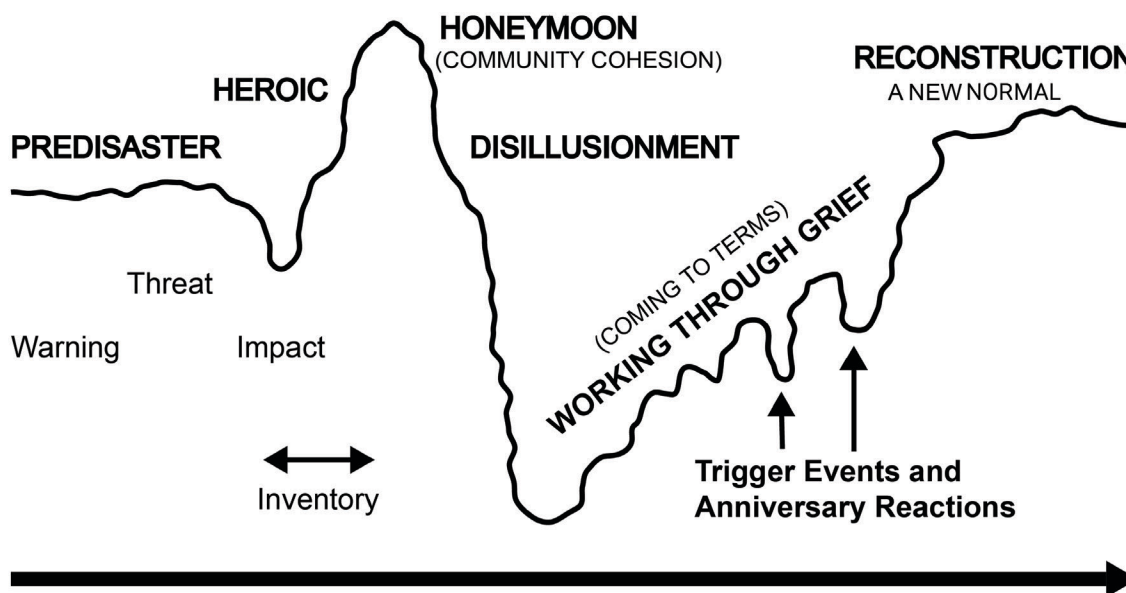


US DISASTER PROGRAM

The Emotional Life Cycle of a Disaster Explained



Written by the Rev. Canon Carl Andrews and Archdeacon Russ Oechsel



UNDERSTANDING THE DIAGRAM

Disasters take an emotional toll on each person to varying degrees, whether directly or indirectly affected. The journey is not always linear, and in fact, often phases of the emotional life cycle of a disaster repeat or last longer than one might originally think.

Immediately after the *impact* of an event, there are *heroic* efforts (rescues, etc.), during a period called the *honeymoon* phase. It is also recognized by community cohesion. Normally, following this period there is an emotional crash characterized by *disillusionment* and perhaps a feeling of abandonment. From that low place, one starts *working through the grief* coupled with the difficulties applying for benefits, filing insurance claims, etc. When there are anniversaries or *trigger events*, such as a new storm, negative emotions return accompanied by another wave of hopelessness. The length of the cycle can take up to five years or more. Keep in mind the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance)—as this grief period superimposes itself in the disillusionment stage as well. People may return to their low place for a time, and start climbing up again to the *new normal*, defined as *reconstruction*, or a new beginning.

Now, in the [elongated emotional life cycle of a disaster diagram](#), most appropriately associated with events such as pandemics, the *honeymoon* stage will peak earlier with some community cohesion or joint confusion caused by not understanding the pandemic itself or misinformation. The period of *disillusionment* becomes elongated as well as the *working through grief* stage. It can take months or longer depending on such things as the availability of treatments or vaccines as well as the ability to contain the spread, and the mortality rate. The grief stage will likely be longer with more depression and anger than with natural disasters. It could take 20-25 years to reach the *reconstruction* stage after a pandemic.