

## NSHRF PROJECT FACT SHEET

### Leading Through Disaster

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Natural disasters leave a legacy of psychological trauma as devastating as their physical damage. While the financial burden may be fairly easy to catalogue, the psychological toll is often difficult to assess. Hurricane Juan ripped through Nova Scotia on September 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> 2003. The Category 2 storm was responsible for eight deaths, almost half-a-billion dollars in damage, and left a substantial portion of the region's major city without electrical power for days. But what about the psychological toll? Natural disasters involve an almost total lack of control, suggesting that their psychological effects may be pronounced.

The experiences of individuals ranged from minimal exposure to the hurricane's effects to extensive property damage and considerable economic loss. People also experienced a wide variety of support and accommodation to their situations from their employers. Dr. Kelloway, a professor in the departments of psychology and management at St. Mary's University, is examining the psychological aftermath of the hurricane, more specifically how employers either mitigated or exacerbated the individual experiences of the storm. He's focusing on the role of organizational leadership, organizational justice, and organizational support as moderators of the relationship between disaster and distress.

Dr. Kelloway believes this is a significant focus for two reasons. "First, work is more than just a 'social address'," he says. "It is a central feature of most people's lives. Second, much as it might do for health promotion activities, the workplace provides a point of contact with adults, much as school does for children. Identifying the ways in which the workplace can facilitate coping with disaster has implications for disaster and emergency-response planning."

A hurricane the magnitude of Juan is classified as an acute stressor. An acute stressor is characterized by a specific onset, a limited duration, and extreme intensity. Acute stressors are relatively neglected in stress literature, perhaps because of the difficulty predicting their onset. But acute stressors can be more psychologically devastating, and their effects more enduring, than chronic stressors, suggesting the need to understand their effects. Like other traumatic stressors, individuals exposed to hurricanes have reported ongoing impairments of psychological well-being including symptoms of post-traumatic stress that endure for much longer than the actual event. Therefore, says Dr. Kelloway, it is critical to identify the factors that lead to such impairments and how to mitigate these effects.

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