

Ateneo de Manila University

**Archium Ateneo**

---

Psychology Department Faculty Publications

Psychology Department

---

12-2015

## Vicarious Trauma and Natural Disasters: A Transcendental Phenomenological Analysis of the Experiences of Families of Typhoon Haiyan Survivors

Arvin Jeremy N. Tan  
*Ateneo de Manila University*

Andrew O. Jardeleza  
*Ateneo de Manila University*

Florian Antoinette P. Sta Maria  
*Ateneo de Manila University*

Mendiola Teng-Calleja  
*Ateneo de Manila University*, [mcalleja@ateneo.edu](mailto:mcalleja@ateneo.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/psychology-faculty-pubs>



Part of the [Clinical Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Custom Citation

Tan, Arvin Jeremy N.; Jardeleza, Andrew O.; Sta Maria, Florian Antoinette P.; and Teng-Calleja, Mendiola, "Vicarious Trauma and Natural Disasters: A Transcendental Phenomenological Analysis of the Experiences of Families of Typhoon Haiyan Survivors" (2015).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology Department at Archium Ateneo. It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology Department Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Archium Ateneo. For more information, please contact [oadrcw.ls@ateneo.edu](mailto:oadrcw.ls@ateneo.edu).

# Vicarious Trauma and Natural Disasters: A Transcendental Phenomenological Analysis of the Experiences of Families of Typhoon Haiyan Survivors

Arvin Jeremy N. Tan  
Andrew O. Jardeleza  
Florian Antoinette P. Sta Maria  
Mendiola Teng-Calleja  
*Ateneo de Manila University*

Using transcendental phenomenology, we examined the experience of vicarious trauma in the context of natural disasters. We specifically looked at the narratives of domestic migrants whose family members were Typhoon Haiyan survivors. Findings show that the survivors' families experienced painful and intrusive psychological distress. The gravity of the pain and loss experienced by the participants was relative to the amount of pain, loss, or damage sustained by the subject of their attachment. Vicarious trauma was experienced as a void-filling phenomenon occupying the emotional space created by the physical distance of the participants from their families experiencing the disaster. This phenomenon and the concurrent traumatic experience improved as the participants made sense of the significance of the event in their lives. Our findings may help in developing interventions to address the effects of vicarious trauma on families of disaster victims and survivors.

*Keywords:* vicarious trauma, domestic migrants, Typhoon Haiyan, Typhoon Yolanda, transcendental phenomenology, natural disasters

Typhoon Haiyan was a storm of unprecedented magnitude and intensity. It has been tagged as the most powerful storm ever to make

landfall in recorded history (British Broadcasting Company [BBC], 2013). Typhoon Haiyan was the beginning of a pattern of extreme weather events predicted by climate scientists to be the effects of rising global temperatures (Mathiesen, 2014).

With the typhoon came a wave of destruction leaving 6,300 persons dead, 28,689 injured, and 1,061 missing (National Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council [NDRMMC], 2014). Typhoon Haiyan left millions homeless and many more without basic needs to sustain life. Damages to infrastructure, production, society, and cross-sectoral institutions amounted to around 90 billion pesos (NDRRMC, 2014).

The full extent of the devastation was believed to be more far-reaching than reported. The individuals directly affected by the typhoon had family, friends, and relatives who were in unaffected areas. Many of them lived, worked, studied, or were in Manila and other nearby areas at the time the Typhoon made landfall. Previous research has shown that traumatic events have an impact not only on victims and survivors but also on those who have witnessed calamities and/or interacted with survivors (Howlett & Collins, 2014). These people were also affected but are rarely given attention in research.

This research aimed to describe the phenomenon of vicarious trauma experienced by domestic migrants due to a natural calamity. Vicarious trauma refers to the psychological impact of indirect exposure to traumatic events (Smith et al., 2014). Our study likewise sought to determine coping mechanisms utilized by these domestic migrants to minimize the effects of vicarious trauma.

### **Vicarious Trauma**

Vicarious trauma is the experience of having trauma symptoms without being directly affected by a natural calamity (Smith et al., 2014). It has “profound psychological effects” (McCann & Pearlman, 1990, p. 133) with intrusive and painful outcomes. Individuals who experience this type of trauma are said to have acquired their symptoms via indirect exposure to the trauma event and through contact with survivors (Creamer & Liddle, 2005). Various studies on vicarious trauma have been conducted among aid/relief workers, counselors,

professionals, and volunteers who have been exposed to individuals with trauma symptoms (Bhushan & Khumar, 2012; Howlett & Collins, 2014; Kadambi & Truscott, 2003; Nen et al., 2011; Tehrani, 2007).

Vicarious trauma is said to be present when an acquaintance of a particular individual who has experienced trauma symptoms reports negative effects as a result of their interaction (Feldman & Kaal, 2007). McCann and Pearlman (1990) presented the mechanism behind this transference of traumatization through the constructivist self-development theory (CSDT). CSDT posits that individuals construct specific cognitive structures that allow them to interpret events in a meaningful manner (Furlonger, 2013). These structures consist of beliefs, assumptions, and expectations about the self and the environment with which persons are able to make sense of the world and their life experiences (Furlonger, 2013).

CSDT emerged from a constructivist lens which proposes that the collection of an individual's experiences contributes to and assimilates itself into the individual's cognitive schema (Branson, Weigand, & Keller, 2014). Accordingly, a person who encounters an individual with a first-hand account of traumatic events assimilates negative constructs into his or her own schema resulting in vicarious traumatization (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). The following sections present previous studies on vicarious trauma resulting from trauma causing experiences.

### **The Impact of Vicarious Trauma**

Individuals with vicarious trauma tend to experience physical and psychological distress (Dombo & Gray, 2013). Among relief workers helping the abused, Nen et al. (2011) found that they experienced shock and disbelief, confusion, fear, hypervigilance, flashbacks, irritability, and difficulty sleeping. Relief workers with vicarious trauma developed a negative view of the world seeing it as more unjust and dangerous, and experienced loss of meaning in life, worthlessness, and feelings of being unable to recover from trauma exposure (Tehrani, 2007).

In recent years, a small body of research has developed on the phenomenon of vicarious trauma in the context of disaster. Studies on the 9/11 attacks have shed light on the far-reaching psychological

effects of a calamity (Kennedy, Charlesworth, & Chen, 2004; Stein et al., 2004). Stein et al. (2004) found that there were Americans feeling persistent distress after the event because of how it made others feel with some being unable to go to work, having fears of going to public gathering, using relaxants because of worries about terrorism, and being incapable of sharing feelings and thoughts about terrorism. Kennedy, Charlesworth, and Chen (2004) found that mothers and children who viewed news coverage on the 9/11 attacks in media had significantly higher levels of distress. In a similar study done related to the Virginia Tech Massacre, it was found that students who viewed coverage of the massacre on television had moderate to acute increases in distress levels (Fallahi & Lesik, 2009). Though the preceding studies show evidence of vicarious trauma in the context of acts of violence or terrorism caused by humans, there is limited research on the occurrence of vicarious trauma in relation to natural disasters.

The study of Smith et al. (2014) on the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake was one of few that looked at vicarious trauma during natural calamities. Using the PTSD-Civilian Version questionnaire, proponents found significant levels of distress among Haitian Americans who were in the United States at the time the earthquake struck (Smith et al., 2014). Further, through the use of the Social Readjustment Scale, they found considerable levels of disruption in the lives of the sampled individuals (Smith et al., 2014). These are all consistent with McCann and Pearlman's (1990) suggestion that individuals with vicarious trauma experience psychological distress as a result of the internalization of the traumatic experience.

However, there were certain limitations in the study of Smith and colleagues (2014). First, they evaluated vicarious trauma based on a single measure and did not dive deeper into the phenomena. The development of items specific to Black immigrants also did not allow for the generalizability of results. Further, the study assumed that vicarious trauma is a pathologic outcome based on their use of the PTSD-Civilian Version questionnaire. Contrary to this, our study proposes that vicarious trauma is not pathologic, as shown in the studies by Stein et al. (2004) and Kennedy et al. (2004); not all participants who had vicarious trauma experience sought professional help – a hallmark of trauma with pathologic outcomes such as PTSD (WHO,

War Trauma Foundation, and World Vision International, 2014). It was therefore deemed imperative to conduct an exploratory study to map the experience of vicarious trauma among citizens of a country frequented by natural calamities. Similar to the research of Smith et al. (2014) that looked into the coping mechanisms of distressed immigrants, our study likewise determined the coping strategies of Filipino domestic migrants who experienced vicarious trauma.

### **Coping**

Vicarious trauma does not necessarily only lead to negative outcomes. According to Abel, Walker, Samios, and Morozow (2014), the deconstruction of the self- and world constructs of an individual eventually leads to personal growth. Tehrani (2007) supported this suggesting that for counselors, the experience of trauma may lead to professional growth. A strategy commonly used to combat the negative effects of traumatization is coping. Coping is defined as the continuous adjustment in both cognitive and behavioral endeavors effectively minimizing the effect of external or internal factors that are deemed taxing or draining to the immediate resources of the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is interesting to note, however, that contemporary research on coping focuses primarily on Western, individualistic cultures (Kuo, 2013) even though collectivistic cultures, such as those in Asia, possess more successful coping behaviors compared to other cultures (Kuo, 2013).

Coping methods considered effective in minimizing the negative effects of trauma include proactive coping and relating with others (Bhushan & Kumar, 2014). Smith and colleagues (2014) found that family and religious support were significant factors in coping with trauma. However, perhaps due to the methodology used, Smith et al. (2014) pointed out that the study was not able to provide an in-depth account of how people cope after a vicarious traumatic event. Thus, there is still a need to explore the effects of vicarious trauma and identify coping strategies that can be used to manage these effects.

The use of a social constructivist perspective may provide an in-depth account of the complexity of the experience of vicarious trauma and ways of coping with it. Specifically, the phenomenological

approach is an ideal mode of inquiry because it allows an experience to be described in its totality.

### **Phenomenology as Lens**

Although numerous studies have shed light on the nature and effects of vicarious trauma, this body of research lack empirical rigor. Likewise, there were difficulties and inconsistencies in defining and operationalizing the construct (Kadambi & Ennis, 2004). Researchers have yet to reach a consensus on the nature and effects of vicarious trauma as a result of aid/professional work. Furthermore, the attempt to limit vicarious trauma as a phenomenon that is unique to those involved in empathic work has not been very successful (Kadambi & Ennis, 2004).

There is evidence that vicarious trauma can be found among individuals not physically present in the site of calamities nor doing empathic work but had families, relatives, and friends, living in disaster stricken areas (see Smith et al., 2014). However, there is limited knowledge on the experiences of these groups specifically on how they experience and cope with vicarious trauma. Thus, using transcendental phenomenology, our study attempted to capture a comprehensive picture of vicarious traumatization in the context of natural disasters.

### **Transcendental Phenomenology**

Our research employed the transcendental phenomenological approach developed by Moustakas (1994). It has its roots in the philosophical works of Hegel and was further developed by Edmund Husserl (Moustakas, 1994). The philosophical framework developed by Husserl has three main components: epoche, noema, and noesis (Moustakas, 1997).

Epoche refers to the suspension of one's preconceptions before conducting a philosophical phenomenological reflection (Moustakas, 1994). This component is the suspension of judgment and presuppositions that opens the possibility of looking through the lens of a pure self (Moustakas, 1994). It allows the phenomenon to be re-

examined with fresh eyes and an open mind. It is going “to the things themselves” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Once this is done, the elements of the phenomenon may now present itself in its totality – the noema and noesis.

The noema refers to the elements of a phenomenon as we perceive them in our consciousness. These are the elements of an event as they become present in our perception, always influenced by our point of view (Moustakas, 1994). It contains synthesis which allows the observers of a phenomenon to view the event in the same way regardless of prior opinions (Moustakas, 1994). This therefore becomes the objective components of the experience – the factual parts that all viewers will most likely have in common.

To enable the phenomenon to appear in its totality however, we must also consider its subjective components, or how the phenomena was experienced through the context of the viewers from “perceived as such” to “perfect self-evidence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 30). Through the noesis, meanings are developed (Moustakas, 1994), allowing the various elements of the phenomenon to be viewed as a product of the contextual experience of the viewers. From noema and noesis, Moustakas (1994) developed textural description and structural description, which became the basis of his phenomenological methodology.

Transcendental phenomenology seeks to develop the elements of the description of an experience rather than simply providing the mechanisms at work in a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). It allows a full sense of what vicarious traumatization is by studying what it meant for the individuals who experienced it. Furthermore, what distinguishes transcendental phenomenology from other qualitative methods is its emphasis on the suspension of one’s experiences before the analysis is formally begun (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). This was included in the section on Epoche. This is important because it allows the researchers to present their personal experiences, set them aside, and then focus on the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Thus, this method provides a more accurate picture of the phenomenon. This integrative approach allows researchers to separate themselves from the phenomenon while being able to communicate the meanings of the event as experienced by the participants in its



totality (Creswell, 2007).

### **Research Questions**

Upon the recommendations of Moustakas (as summarized in Creswell, 2007), our study sought to provide an account of the traumatic event and its outcomes by asking how the events were experienced and given meaning by the participants based on the contexts where they came from. We specifically sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of vicarious trauma of individuals whose families were severely affected by Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan?
2. How did these experiences affect these individuals from the time Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan happened until the present?
3. What strategies were used by these individuals to cope with the impact of Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan from the time the typhoon happened until the present?

### **METHOD**

The study sought to explore the experience of vicarious trauma of domestic migrants who hail from Tacloban. Participants were selected based on a set of criteria related to their experience of Typhoon Haiyan. Semi-structured interviews were used to capture their experience of the Typhoon and its aftermath.

### **Participants**

We interviewed 11 participants who have domestically migrated from their respective provinces to Manila. These include college students, professionals (e.g., lawyers, doctors, engineers), and blue-collar workers. We selected participants through snowball sampling, which was a recommended sampling approach for transcendental phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007). We used the following inclusion criteria in choosing participants:

1. Individuals whose permanent residence is Tacloban, Leyte and were studying or working in Manila at the time Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan made landfall.

2. Individuals who experienced at least one of the physical, emotional, and cognitive indicators of distress based on the criteria set by the World Health Organization, War Trauma Foundation, & World Vision International (2014)

3. Those with homes, property, family, and friends in Tacloban which were affected by the typhoon.

4. Must have returned to Tacloban within one month after the event. These individuals would have seen the full impact of the devastation in the wake of the typhoon's aftermath. [Government estimates that most areas have been rehabilitated at least by the end of the second month after the calamity (Rappler, 2014).]

### **Data Collection Instruments**

An interview schedule was used in the collection of data. Questions for the semi-structured interview were in two languages—Tagalog and English. Upon the recommendation of Creswell (2007) and the methodology employed by Moustakas (1994), the questions sought to determine what happened before, during, and after the onslaught of Typhoon Haiyan, and how these experiences have affected the participants.

The participants were asked questions such as “How did you feel when you found out about the typhoon?” to understand the experience of the participants before the typhoon arrived. They were also asked questions like “What were you thinking about?” to shed light on their experiences as the typhoon made its way across the country. Finally they were asked “What did you do after the typhoon has passed?”

These questions were aimed at capturing the depth of the experience by allowing the participants to tell their stories in light of the particular contexts they were coming from. By asking these questions, we were able to capture descriptions that will allow for a complete understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Data Collection**

Each interview was conducted in a place agreed upon with the participant. We began by explaining the nature of the study and

continued with obtaining the consent of the participant. A semi-structured interview schedule was used which aimed to capture the description of what happened before, during, and after Typhoon Haiyan, how was it like for the participants, and what the events meant to them.

### **Data Analysis**

This study used the data analysis procedures of Moustakas, which were summarized by Creswell (2007) in three main steps. First is the development of a textural description, which describes the facts that occurred during the events. It aims to answer the “what” of the experience. Second is the development of a structural description, which describes how the facts of the event are experienced in light of the contexts the participants are coming from. It aims to provide a precise description of the subjective aspect of the experience of the participants. Last is the integration of the textural and structural descriptions, which will allow us to paint the “overall essence of the experience” (Creswell, 2007, p. 80).

The transcribed data underwent initial analysis through the extraction of significant quotes that provide a precise picture of the participants’ experience (Moustakas, 1994). Next, themes were developed from the extracted quotes. Clusters of meanings were formed to provide a clear picture of the impact of the particular phenomenon in the personal lives of the participants (Creswell, 2007). This was conducted with two of us forming themes from the extracted quotes, individually. We then met and deliberated on which themes precisely capture the experiences of the participants. The extracted quotes and themes were used to develop the textural description and structural description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). An integrative description was then developed from these, reporting the totality of the phenomenon as it was experienced by the participants.

### **Reflexivity**

In clearing our minds through the epoche process, we recalled our experiences of natural disasters especially in the context of having families who have experienced devastating disasters while we were

away from home. Some of us had families residing in the Visayas and Mindanao while studying in Metro Manila. We know what it was like to feel helpless in times of great adversity such as when our home provinces were subjected to storms of unprecedented nature or other such natural disasters. Given these, we went through a process of recalling, articulating, and writing these relevant individual experiences of having family members affected by natural disasters. The process allowed us to move towards having open and receptive minds allowing us to fully listen, hear, and objectively make sense of the experiences shared to us by the participants.

## RESULTS

The experience of vicarious trauma among domestic migrants contained five meaning units: Urgency to Reach Family, Life Pause, Feelings of Disentanglement, Seeking Relief, and Making Sense of the Event. Urgency to Reach Family is about the desperate need to take action after learning about the gravity of the typhoon. Life Pause summarizes the experiences of the domestic migrants between the time that they could not talk to their families and the time that they learned that their families were alive. Feelings of Disentanglement encapsulates the lived experiences of the participants relative to their position as migrants coupled with their deep connection to the affected areas. Seeking Relief captures the ways in which the participants release their internal issues after learning how much the calamity has affected their hometowns. Making Sense of the Event show the manner in which the participants were able to come to terms with their experiences of the whole ordeal. Table 1 shows these meaning units and their corresponding subunits.

### Textural Description

This section describes each meaning units in detail. They have been broken down into smaller units which describe elemental features of each main theme. Each subunit is followed by quotes from the interview participants to highlight the depth of each theme. These describe the experience of vicarious trauma.

Table 1. Meaning Units and Subunits of the Experience of Vicarious Trauma

---

Meaning Units	Meaning Subunits
Urgency to Reach Family	Urgency to go home Seeking information about family
Life Pause	Worry Anxiety Inability to concentrate Helplessness Fear
Feelings of Disentanglement	Feelings of pain and loss similar to victims Disbelief about the intensity of the events taking place Guilt Anger
Seeking Relief	Acceptance of the facts Relief from knowledge of family's safety Distracting one's self in response to helplessness Finding solace through God Relief through social relations Ensuring financial security
Making Sense of the Event	Downward comparison Expressions of hope and gratitude

---

**Urgency to reach family.** Urgency to reach family is the desperate desire to be able to do something upon learning about what happened to their hometown after the typhoon. With the distance from their families, they felt the need to know about how their family was doing, thus the urgency to act right away.

**Urgency to go home.** Many of the participants expressed the need to urgently go home upon hearing the news about the effects of the typhoon. This meaning unit was often present when the participants discussed their experiences. The disconcerting emotions were usually experienced after being told of the news and seeing images of the catastrophic effects on media. As shared by one participant, “My wife... She wants us to go home but transportation was difficult. You cannot just go home without money because you know that there is no money there.”

**Seeking information.** A common theme that stood out from the responses was the need to know about how their family was doing in their hometowns. The intensity of Typhoon Haiyan caused a power blackout in some affected areas. As such, it was evident in the responses how much the participants wanted to get information about their families. A participant shared that, “...we were looking for ways... in the internet...because there was something...like ‘search for missing people’. My mom was trying to contact people as well.” Another participant expressed, “... that feeling...every 3 hours, you go online, check for latest updates but there are none.”

**Life pause.** Life pause is the collective experience of worry and anxiety of the participants between the time they weren’t able to contact their families and the time they heard from their families. The power blackout in the affected areas resulted in a period of waiting from a few days to a week before being able to hear from their families again.

**Worry.** Many of the participants experienced a surge of worry after not being able to contact their families, especially after hearing the news and seeing the aftermath of the typhoon. An interviewee expressed, “I panicked a lot, because I didn’t know where they are, I didn’t know if they survived. I cried a lot that night.” Another participant shared her ordeal, “I didn’t even go to school much that week. I sit in class and listen to my profs and pretend that I’m fine

when my mind is completely somewhere else.”

**Anxiety.** Some participants went through experiences of worrying about the welfare of their relatives for an extended period of time. This was one of the results of the unavailability of information and loss of contact with their families during the onslaught of the Typhoon. One participant highlighted this when she explained, “It was so hard ‘cause I was thinking when I go to sleep, I’ll wake up to a text. But, Saturday there was still nothing...I was just talking to high school friends, they were going through the same thing, like ‘oh, have you heard about your family?’ and some of them would just cry to me on the phone and I would also cry to them.” Prolonged worry was accompanied by difficulties in sleeping and the inability to perform their daily tasks. Difficulties in sleeping were best captured when this participant said, “...it was already midnight...I was thinking about where my (family) was and what could have happened to them there, I keep thinking about them.”

**Inability to concentrate.** After hearing news about the typhoon, most of the participants cannot focus on their work and daily activities. An interviewee said, “I felt like I was floating...my mind was just blank. I was really frustrated because I could not do anything. What happened? Were they still alive?” Another participant shared, “I didn’t go to class because... I couldn’t bear it. My phone couldn’t ring or they might try and contact me through email or something, so I didn’t go to class.”

**Helplessness.** The participants experienced a sense of helplessness during their period of waiting. They felt that they were unable to do anything to help their families because of the loss of communication, lack of information, and their physical distance from them. As recounted by an interviewee, “...we tried to contact everyone. We couldn’t really do anything. We just felt really helpless. Just watched the news and hoped that they’re still okay...”

**Fear.** The experiences of some participants involved overwhelming psychological distress brought about by perceived threats to their welfare and their families. This is the result of circulating rumors and news reports regarding civil safety and the devastation left by the typhoon. “I was afraid... I don’t know what happened...maybe they were one of those who...I cannot help but think about it because

a lot of people died.” One participant expressed his concerns, “...I read ...looters are forcing themselves inside the house, they were looting people inside and they had guns and the prisoners went out of the jail...I was scared of that.” The fear induced by media reports on looting and lawlessness is evident. The imagery painted by the participant shows the landscape of his thoughts as he was making his way back home. His report on the lack of civil order and the subsequent fear that resulted highlight the perceived threat to him and his family.

**Feelings of disentanglement.** This is a collection of the participants’ experiences distinct to vicarious trauma in the context of natural disasters. These experiences reflect emotions elicited by their unique position in relation to the traumatic event. The meaning subunits below are a result of their physical distance from the affected areas and their equally deep attachment to their families who bore the brunt of Typhoon Haiyan.

**Feelings of pain and loss similar to victims.** This meaning unit is the internalization of the pain and loss experienced by their family and close relations who directly endured the onslaught of the Typhoon. This is characterized by emotional pain and a feeling of loss by the participants. There is no variation between the degree of pain and loss experienced by an individual who directly experienced the traumatic event and those who experienced them vicariously. This is best exemplified by the response of one participant, “...I said I have experienced a lot in life...but that... that was the most horrific event I’ve experienced. Instead of being able to go home, I couldn’t make it home because there were a lot of obstacles.”

**Disbelief about the intensity of the events taking place.** This was evident after the participants heard about what happened in the aftermath of the typhoon. There was a feeling of disbelief, in which most of the participants could not believe that an event of such intensity could occur in their hometown and to their families. A participant expressed, “...what happened was too much... I did not really expect that that was what they were experiencing. My mother has not eaten, my father...they were first making sure that the children would have something to eat... you know the sliced bread that I brought, almost all of it was consumed in one sitting.”

**Guilt.** Upon knowing about the death of a family member, the



destruction of their respective houses, and the death of many people because of the typhoon, a good number of participants expressed their feelings of guilt. These feelings were elicited by their inability to help their loved ones due to their physical absence and the incapacity to provide adequate relief through material or social support. An interviewee shared, "... I felt guilty, that I was here... I'm comfortable, and they were like... I thought, if they survived, what if they were just surviving on scarce food, like just canned goods...I was worried if they were in any state of discomfort...." Another participant shared, "I stayed for the entire Wednesday and Thursday, Friday morning I left...that was one of my regret...my decision to go home early... I knew that the school would understand, my work will understand...but I still put my work first."

**Anger.** Strong emotions felt by the participants elicited the need to look for something to blame, which more often than not was directed at the way the government handled the disaster operations. Feelings of distrust and inadequacy were expressed by the participants as to how the various government units handled the situation in the affected areas. One participant said, "I blamed the government... because I watched the news every day and it seemed like they were not doing anything helpful. The fact that other countries were the ones packing the relief goods..."

**Seeking relief.** This was the process of releasing strong emotions: a form of catharsis used by the participants as possible ways to be able to cope with the overwhelming events that took place. Strategies used here blunted the effects of intrusive and painful psychological distress caused by the traumatic event. These range from acceptance to distracting one's self through various media, resulting in relief from the stressors caused by the event and subsequently allowing them to resume daily activities.

**Acceptance of the facts.** The overwhelming realization of the magnitude and scale of Typhoon Haiyan caused the participants to come to terms with the possibility of having lost everything in the wake of the storm. They then attempted to gain relief from the aforementioned feeling of loss by assuming the worst and preparing themselves. This is evident in the following statement, "ABS and GMA were already showing some footage about what's happening there..."

when I checked online...footage of the storm, of very strong winds, very strong...I accepted that this is not just an ordinary Typhoon." In the aftermath of the Typhoon, a participant expressed his attempt to prepare for the things that were to meet him once he arrives home, "...I had to accept whatever fate was, I just had to be strong, and those were the thoughts playing in my mind, the thoughts of worry."

***Relief from knowledge of family's safety.*** Participants found solace in the fact that their families were spared from the devastation brought about by the typhoon. Despite the difficulties in communication, participants who were able to determine the relative well-being of their families through other means were able to significantly lessen their feelings of anxiety and worry: "...I searched... that database for missing people...I described my family...It was like ah, yes, yes, yes! Because they were already safe, they just stayed in the house, for the meantime."

***Distracting one's self in response to helplessness.*** Feelings of helplessness experienced by the participants resulted in the desire to be active in an attempt to address its negative outcomes. These momentary distractions range from volunteering in relief operations or through the continuance of everyday tasks to regain sense of normalcy, "...I continued working...it also helped not to be idle at home. That you were busy with something." A student added by sharing, "I went to all these places where I could volunteer because...I couldn't stay here and do nothing and just wait! They don't know what I'm thinking because everyone else is just going on with their lives and...I don't even know if my family is like..."

***Finding solace through God.*** Some participants turned to religion to cope with recurring feelings of loss and helplessness. The feeling that things were now beyond their control led them to God, whom they believed will deliver their families from harm. One participant said, "...just prayed to the Lord hoping that they would be safe especially my child." Another shared the importance of faith in helping her deal with the ordeal, "What made me stronger was faith because when the Lord is there, I know they (family) will be protected."

***Relief through social relations.*** The participants shared that they felt significantly better when they talked to others who were experiencing the same thing. Friends, family, and other social

relations proved to be effective outlets as they shared their thoughts and feelings about the event – “...it helped... to talk about it, but at the same time I couldn’t talk about it...” Also, “It was easier with people who were going through the same thing compared to just staying in the dorm ‘cause I just felt that I was gonna go crazy.”

**Ensuring financial security.** Individuals felt the need to report to work or look for other means of gaining financial security in an attempt to ensure that they will be able to provide for the needs of their families. One participant recounted, “It was okay. My mother was able to overcome this... if I didn’t have a job, they won’t be able to find any food there...I sent them money.”

**Making sense of the event.** Gradually, participants were able to overcome these strong emotions because of unfolding events that transpired after Typhoon Haiyan. The passage of time led to valuable insight or realizations which led to better emotional well-being. These allowed them to integrate their experiences in their lives.

**Downward comparison.** Participants who compared their experiences to those less fortunate than them felt significantly better afterwards. These participants attributed their losses to be minimal when compared to that of other people from affected areas. As shared by a participant, “...I feel grateful...seeing the people there...when I compare my loss to theirs, it seemed like I didn’t have any loss at all.”

**Expressions of hope and gratitude.** Participants learned to adopt a positive outlook in the aftermath of the Typhoon. For them, it was essential to hold on to that sense of hope that everything will turn out for the better. They were also very thankful and blessed after putting into perspective their experiences. A participant said, “...We were still lucky...the feeling that...you should be thankful, you should still feel blessed because in spite of everything that happened, your family is still complete.” Expressions of gratitude like this are evidence of efforts to put their traumatic experiences behind them. One participant said, “Everyone sees the good....It was a big thing that we went through, and now it’s over. Now, we just have to be happy that we’re still here. It’s like a whole new outlook on how life should be.” Another mentioned, “It was a constant effort of trying to think positive.” A participant shared her hopeful dreams for the province in this simple statement: “I just knew Tacloban was going to recover

again.”

### **Structural Description**

This section describes how the meaning units above were experienced. The participants were found to have experienced vicarious trauma in a nonlinear way. The meanings units were constructed at various instances throughout the phenomenon and were deeply anchored on their family’s experience of the typhoon. The type and gravity of the pain and loss felt by the participants upon contact with their families was reflective of the expressed pain and actual loss experienced by their loved ones.

Upon learning about the intensity of the typhoon and subsequent loss of communication, an immediate reaction was to seek more information about the typhoon and the status of their families. Delays in communication led them to pursue the thought of going back home to personally ensure their family’s safety.

Subsequently, the different aspects of vicarious trauma were expressed throughout different periods of the traumatic event. Experiences came about depending on the gravity of the event experienced by their loved ones. An example was one participant who initially thought that her family was relatively safe expressed her sentiments in the following way, “...my housemate...I told her it was okay, and there was nothing to worry about because I was texting my mom...people in our town always evacuate to our house. There was absolutely nothing to worry about.” However, the moment she found about the reality her family was facing, the tone of her message shifted to a more sullen mood, “My uncle texted me saying, ‘Your dad is in the hospital, your sister’s with us and your mom is still missing.’ I tried calling but the phone wasn’t ringing. That was when I panicked. So I said to myself, what is this, was it really that strong?”

The pain and loss experienced by the participant is relative to the amount of perceived loss as reflected in this statement: “I felt a deep sense of loss, of course, and I worked on it for so many years...Yes! I worked hard for it for so many years. I worked so that I can get it. But what can I do...” Their home, which was the product of her hard work in Manila as a house help for 11 years, was completely destroyed.

Being the culmination of her life's work, the gravity of the pain and loss experienced was contingent on the relation of the participant to the object lost. Her house was completely destroyed. When asked about what the deepest source of her pain was, she answered, "...It was really the house, because I worked for it for so many years, and in just one moment, nothing, there was nothing left."

The coping strategies participants employed were influenced by their perceived loss and its relevance to the narratives of their families. The different relief seeking strategies they employed are nonlinear, similar to the manner in which psychological distress was experienced as indicated above. The relationship between the type and gravity of the experience of psychological distress and relief seeking strategies employed were shown in the following statements. One of the participants narrated her story of moving forward as necessitated by ensuring the financial stability of her family. She said, "Of course, I'm not allowed to have spent all my money come pay-day. That wasn't okay because there were people in the house, they should not starve. That kept me running. Did I have a choice?" She lost her home whose lease was their primary source of income. Moving forward for her was necessitated by the need to provide for her family despite the pain and loss. This was also evident in the way she dealt with the loss of her mother, "My friend said, 'You are really strong!' Why? Do I have a choice? If I weren't strong, what will I do? All my aunts were shocked that I was able to pull through. Do I really have a choice not to?"

Another participant recounted the relief she experienced through her friends at a time when the uncertainty due to the lack of information and loss of communication was heightened, "The day after, I heard that there were a lot of casualties, I went to UP... and everyone in the dorm who was from Tacloban huddled and stayed together, talking about Yolanda and what-ifs...we all went to church together, even my friend who was agnostic attended mass. And it was like the mood lightened a little...we were all together." She added, "I cried a lot, like I was so happy. I mean like, I felt elated...even if our house is broken, ah, it is okay, as long as they are safe." This provides evidence of the relief she experienced from finding out that her family was safe. Other components of the traumatic event became irrelevant to the participant when she received news about her family's safety. This

relief was experienced as a result of the pain being anchored mainly to the unavailability of information, and the loss of communication with the family.

The experience of vicarious trauma is thus anchored on the experiences of the subject of attachment of the participants. The gravity of the pain and loss experienced is relative to the amount of pain, loss, or damage incurred upon the subject of their attachment (i.e., family, house, livelihood). Coping strategies were employed following these painful thoughts and emotions as deemed necessary by the affected individuals to help them get by. The meaning units are experienced at various points throughout the phenomenon and are not dependent on time. One may experience heavier loss on certain occasions specifically in recalling certain narratives and how it affected the normalcy of their lives. Throughout the experience of vicarious trauma, there is a shift between feelings of pain and loss and moments of relief. These gradually dissipated in the efforts of the participants to make sense of the events. Participants were able to view their experiences on a broader perspective by comparing their experiences with that of others. These all occur in ambivalence with a sense of detachment and equally deep connection to the events taking place resulting from the unique situation of the participants.

The way in which the various intrusive and painful psychological stressors were experienced is reflective of the distance between the participants who were in Manila during the time of the typhoon, and their families who were in the affected areas.

Figure 1 depicts the central theme of the phenomenon—the general experience of being distant to the event yet at the same time feeling very close to it because of the connection with family who was directly experiencing its full force. Relief seeking strategies are employed to address the painful thoughts and emotions. The arrow in the figure depicts the passage of time leading to a moment wherein the participants are able to make sense of the events they have been through. They gain the ability to integrate the traumatic experience to their everyday life.

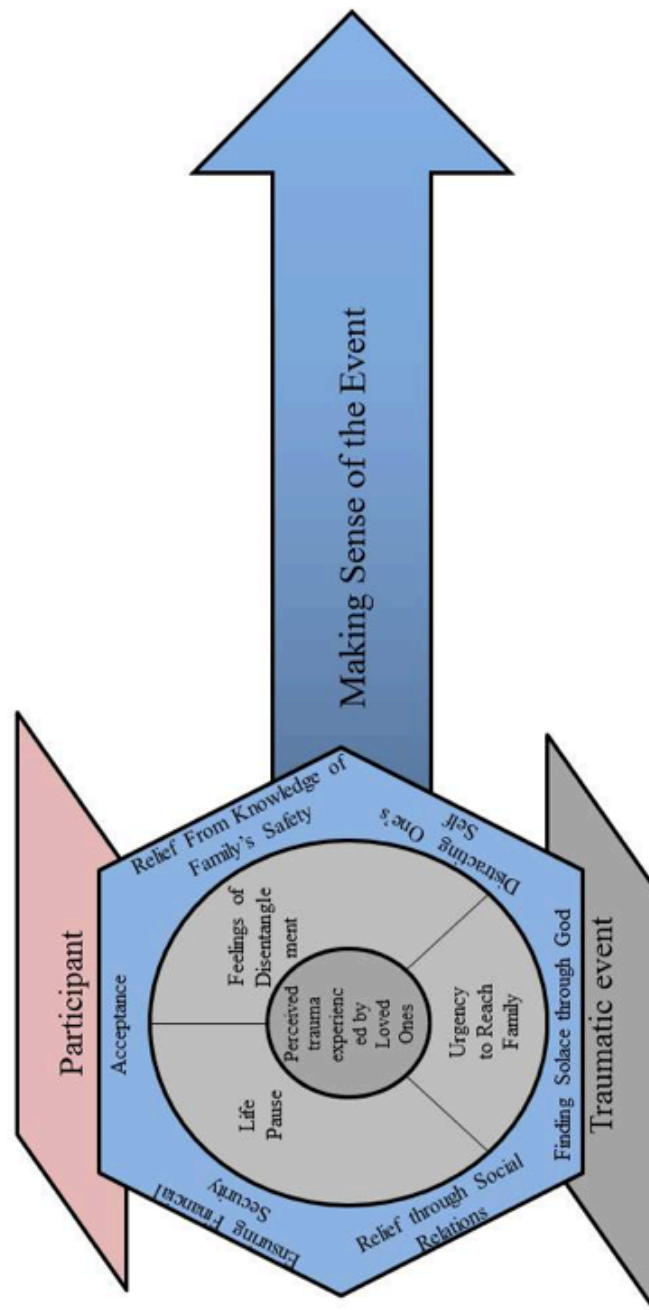


Figure 1. Structural description of vicarious trauma across time.

## DISCUSSION

This study found that in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, the participants felt an urgent need to go home. They also experienced anxiety, worry, helplessness, fear, inability to concentrate, pain and loss, guilt, disbelief, and anger. Participants were concerned of the safety of their loved ones and the more the participants thought about the peril that their families were facing, the more susceptible they were to manifesting symptoms of vicarious trauma. One of the symptoms of trauma reported by the participants was the feeling of helplessness. This is consistent with the findings of Tehrani (2007) on aid workers helping abused children who also reported feelings of helplessness after some time. The helplessness of the participants in the present study was elicited by the inability to contact, help, and ensure the safety of their loved ones. The experience of helplessness manifested in relief workers described in Tehrani's study (2007) on the other hand is attributed to these relief workers adapting the worldview of survivors who passed their own feelings of helplessness via proximity and exposure.

The meaning subunits under Life Pause and Feelings of Disentanglement were some recurring themes that manifested in the participants within varying intervals throughout the ordeal: before, during, and after the events of typhoon Yolanda. These findings are consistent with the psychological distress reported in the studies of Fallahi and Lesik (2009), Kennedy et al. (2004), Nen et al. (2011), and Smith et al., (2014). For a time during the onslaught of the typhoon, the participants experienced an inability to concentrate on their work and daily life activities. This is similar to the disruptions of daily activities experienced by Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 (Stein et al., 2004). These disruptions were attributed to the unsettling nature of the traumatic event ensuing fear and feelings of uncertainty. In contrast, the participants of this study were able to go back to their daily activities after some time, which were even utilized as a form of relief seeking and coping. This may be an effort to regain control of their lives in what they reported were situations wherein they felt very helpless.

Initially, contact with survivors was the primary goal of the



participants in this study. With the loss of communication and news blackout, loss of contact with loved ones and family member resulted in psychological distress. Participants who were able to maintain communication with family and friends during the events of the typhoon seem to have experienced less psychological distress as compared to those who lost all forms of contact with their loved ones. By contrast, hearing stories about the experiences of their loved ones caused the participants pain and distress. This often occurred after communications were reestablished and the safety of the family has been assured. This is consistent with the description of vicarious trauma by Creamer and Liddle (2005), and Howlett and Collins (2014) as negative effects elicited through interactions with survivors of a traumatic event.

Interestingly, in the present study, it was found that these forms of psychological distress were experienced in a nonlinear way. Specifically, this means that the participants were prone to experiencing one form of psychological distress or another at different points in time such as before, during, and after the typhoon. This denotes that psychological distress was anchored on specific experiences, and not on one single timeframe. This was not highlighted in any of the previous studies done before on vicarious trauma. The same concept of dependence on the specificity of the events can also be applied to the relief experienced by the participants. Participants reported the experience of relief during various points in time throughout their ordeal such as after first discovering that their families were safe or seeing their families for the first time after the storm.

This study finds that distance is an important factor in the occurrence of vicarious trauma. The distance between people not directly experiencing the event and their relations who are directly experiencing the event is the essence of the phenomenon. Consequently, the findings of the present study are consistent with the cognitive self-development theory posited by McCann and Pearlman (1990), specifically on the relationship shared between the intensity of the vicarious trauma that is experienced and the kind of trauma experienced by the individuals who experienced the event first-hand. This was best seen in the meaning unit of Life Pause and Feelings of Disentanglement. It was as if the family members themselves

experienced the traumatic event first-hand. McCann and Pearlman (1990) suggested that the incidence and intensity of vicarious trauma was a result of the number of meetings between aid/relief worker/therapist and a trauma survivor. In the present study, however, it was found that the degree of the vicarious trauma experienced by the participants was directly hinged on the perceived trauma experienced by their loved ones. This may mean that individuals who were able to maintain communication with distant loved ones through the storm and were able to immediately know that their families were spared from the devastation brought about by the typhoon seem to have experienced less vicarious trauma than those who lost communication.

The participants employed relief seeking strategies that helped them go on with their daily activities despite the pain and intrusiveness of the traumatic experience. Certain relief seeking strategies such as Finding Solace Through God, and Relief Through Social Relations are similar to the coping strategies using religion and family found to be significant in the study of Smith et al. (2014) among the Haitian American relatives of earthquake survivors.

It was interesting to find though the salience of Acceptance of the Facts, and Ensuring Financial Security as relief seeking strategies. These were not found in literature. Acceptance allowed the participants to go on with their daily activities in the face of uncertainty. This may point to a culture of resilience amongst the participants, which needs to be further explored. Financial security, on the other hand, was a pertinent issue due to the scarcity of financial resources characteristic of most families in the Philippines. The typhoon took most of whatever resources the participants had which may have presented them with a bleak future. This hampered their confidence in their capacity to rise out of the calamity. Ensuring the security of finances, therefore, might have provided a lot of relief for family members and allowed them to realize that they can help their families.

The feelings of relief then culminate in feelings of hopefulness and gratitude. Ultimately, participants reached a point where they were able to integrate their experiences into something that they could gain meaning from. This was achieved at a point wherein the participants claimed to have “moved on” from the events that transpired while maintaining feelings of hopefulness that things will get better. They

also felt a sense of gratitude for being spared from too much loss. There were some instances wherein the participants experienced the same kind of feeling at different points during the aftermath of the typhoon. The participants shared that they experienced episodes of psychological distress even after initial forms of relief were experienced. This was exemplified when participants generally felt relieved after discovering their families were spared from the devastation brought about by the typhoon, yet sometime after felt the same form of distress after seeing first-hand the destruction when they went home. A sense of acceptance and finality of the events that transpired led to the ability to make sense of everything. The passage of time led to a general sense of relief, with participants claiming that they have moved on from the events.

Feelings of relief and coping are reflective of the findings of Abel et al. (2014) and Tehrani (2007) suggesting that good things may come from the experience of psychological trauma. In these studies, the experience of trauma allowed for new perspectives in life leading to personal and professional growth. In this study, being able to make sense of the experience resulted in renewed relationships with loved ones, recommitment to work, appreciation for life, gratitude for the things not lost, and hopefulness for the future. This is the result of new perspectives brought about by the ability to integrate their experiences in their lives. It continues to help the participants in living the lives they have today.

### **Limitations and Implications**

This study had several limitations such as controlling for the variations in the number of days and ways by which participants were able to return home as part of the inclusion criteria. Moreover, the intensity of the different facets of vicarious trauma that were experienced cannot be inferred in this study due to its qualitative nature. Future studies may shed light on the interaction of the different components of vicarious trauma, its intensity, relationships to coping, and subsequent quality of life.

This study allows us to better understand the experiences of those who are going through vicarious trauma. It is our hope that

these findings can provide avenues for production of scales and tests that are pertinent in determining if vicarious trauma is experienced by an individual. This allows for the identification of those at-risk of experiencing the detrimental effects brought about by vicarious trauma. Also, findings from this study can be used to create a first-aid or self-help tool for those who are directly exposed to vicarious trauma, specifically, by taking advantage of the data on the relief seeking strategies reported in this study. Ultimately, the goal of this study is to provide a possible form of psychological intervention that will enable counselors and primary responders to better help individuals with vicarious trauma.

## REFERENCES

- Abel, L., Walker, C., Samios, C., & Morozow, L. (2014). Vicarious posttraumatic growth: Predictors of growth and relationships with adjustment. *Traumatology: An International Journal*, 20(1), 9-18.
- Bhushan, B., & Kumar, J. (2012). A study of posttraumatic stress and growth in tsunami relief volunteers. *Journal of Loss And Trauma*, 17(2), 113-124.
- Branson, D. C., Weigand, D. A., & Keller, J. E. (2014). Vicarious trauma and decreased sexual desire: A hidden hazard of helping others. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 6(4), 398-403.
- British Broadcasting Company. (2013, November 8). Super Typhoon Haiyan: Satellite images. *BBC News*. Retrieved August 21, 2014, from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-24866265>
- Creamer, T., & Liddle, B. J. (2005). Secondary traumatic stress among disaster mental health workers responding to the September 11 Attacks. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 18(1), 89-96.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Dombo, E. A., & Gray, C. (2013). Engaging spirituality in addressing vicarious trauma in clinical social workers: A self-care model.

- Social Work & Christianity*, 40(1), 89-104.
- Fallahi, C. R., & Lesik, S. A. (2009). The effects of vicarious exposure to the recent massacre at Virginia Tech. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 1(3), 220-230.
- Feldman, D. B., & Kaal, K. (2007). Vicarious trauma and assumptive worldview: Beliefs about the world in acquaintances of trauma victims. *Traumatology*, 13(3), 21-31.
- Furlonger, B., & Taylor, W. (2013). Supervision and the management of vicarious traumatization among Australian telephone and online counsellors. *Australian Journal of Guidance And Counselling*, 23(1), 82-94.
- Howlett, S., & Collins, A. (2014). Vicarious traumatization: Risk and resilience among crisis support volunteers in a community organisation. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 44(2), 180-190.
- Kadambi, M. A., & Ennis, L. (2004). Reconsidering vicarious trauma: A review of the literature and its' limitations. *Journal of Trauma Practice*, 3(2), 1-21.
- Kadambi, M. A., & Truscott, D. (2003). Vicarious traumatization and burnout among therapists working with sex offenders. *Traumatology*, 9(4), 216-230.
- Kennedy, C., Charlesworth, A., & Chen, J. (2004). Disaster at a distance: Impact of 9.11.01 televised news coverage on mothers' and children's health. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, 19(5), 329-339.
- Kuo, B. (2013). Collectivism and coping: Current theories, evidence, and measurements of collective coping. *International Journal Of Psychology*, 48(3), 374-388.
- Lazarus, R., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping* (1st ed.). New York: Springer Pub. Co.
- Mathiesen, K. (2014, April 28). Typhoon Haiyan was just the start – prepare for an ever stormier future. *The Guardian*. Retrieved August 21, 2014, from <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/apr/28/haiyan-prepare-future-fierce-weather>
- McCann, I., & Pearlman, L. (1990). Vicarious traumatization: A framework for understanding the psychological effects of working

- with victims. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 3(1), 131-149.
- Michalopoulos, L. M., & Aparicio, E. (2012). Vicarious trauma in social workers: The role of trauma history, social support, and years of experience. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 21(6), 646-664.
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. New York: SAGE Publications.
- National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council. (2014). Update re the effects of typhoon "Yolanda" (HAIYAN) April 17, 2014. [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://www.ndrrmc.gov.ph/attachments/article/1177/Update%20Effects%20TY%20YOLANDA%2017%20April%202014.pdf>
- Nen, S. S., Astbury, J., Subhi, N. N., Alavi, K. K., Lukman, Z. M., Sarnon, N. N., . . . Mohamad, M. (2011). The impact of vicarious trauma on professionals involved in child sexual abuse cases (CSA). *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 19, 147-155.
- Rappler. (2014, August 13). *Yolanda/Haiyan*. Retrieved August 21, 2014, from <http://www.rappler.com/move-ph/issues/disasters/typhoon-yolanda>
- Smith, L. E., Darren, R. B., Schwartz, B. S., Whitt, C. L., Christman, S.T., Donnelly, S., . . . Kobetz, E. (2014). Coping with vicarious trauma in the aftermath of a natural disaster. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 42(1), 2-12.
- Stein, B. D., Elliott, M. N., Jaycox, L. H., Collins, R. L., Berry, S. H., Klein, D. J., & Schuster, M. A. (2004). A national longitudinal study of the psychological consequences of the September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attacks: Reactions, impairment, and help-seeking. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal & Biological Processes*, 67(2), 105-117.
- Tehrani, N. (2007). The cost of caring: The impact of secondary trauma on assumptions, values, and beliefs. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*, 20, 325-339.
- WHO, War Trauma Foundation, & World Vision International. (2014). *Psychological first aid: guide for field workers*. Retrieved from [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241548205\\_eng.pdf?ua=1](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241548205_eng.pdf?ua=1)

