

PEOPLE



RICHARD N. LEVINE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Psychologist Orli Peter, in her Santa Monica office, is helping her patients as well as her family cope with the quake.

Dealing with disaster

Psychologist sets aside damage to her own house, aids victims'

By Bryan Maxwell
STAFF WRITER

The phone started ringing just as psychologist Orli Peter had started to deal with the destruction to her chimney, the broken water pipe and the gas leak in her West Los Angeles home.

Nursing two toes broken by falling plaster, the expectant mother fielded 20 calls from patients and attempted to soothe her daughter, Elana.

"My 2-year-old kept trying to look for a cause for the disaster," said the 37-year-old Chicago native. "She heard the heater rattle and equated the earthquake with the heater. Then she blamed her father and then she blamed herself.

"Adults and children both tend to look for the causes of trauma. As soon as you

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Psychologist Orli Peter, director, Mount St. Mary's College Family and Child Counseling Program and the Psychology Graduate Program

come up with an explanation, it guides your feelings.

Since Monday's earthquake, psychologists like Peter have had to deal with victims traumatized by the disaster.

Peter helps families through difficult transitions such as divorce and various

forms of abuse at her part-time practice in Santa Monica.

As director of Mount St. Mary's College Family and Child Counseling Program and as director of the Psychology Graduate Program, Peter said she has put an increased emphasis on crisis trauma training.

"It wasn't until after Vietnam that psychologists started to study the effects of trauma. The field developed further when researchers started to notice similar responses in behavior between veterans and battered women," she said.

A number of the calls that she received after the quake were from people looking for someone to talk to about their experiences, which Peter said she can relate to.

But to understand what victims are going through does not necessarily make

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helping them easier, she adds. "I try to be empathetic with my patients anyway. I'm wary of my experience making me more empathetic — that there would be a point where I would be dealing with my own feelings and not those of my patients. It's a double-edged sword."

When Peter entered college she was leaning toward a career in journalism. She said her decision to enter UCLA's psychology program was partly inspired by her experiences with her father, a Holocaust survivor.

After completing her undergraduate work, she went on to receive her doctorate from UC Berkeley.

She has also conducted psychological research at UCLA and at RAND, where her husband, Rich, is a writer-analyst.

In dealing with quake victims, Peter said the two points she has stressed are the need to deal with the reality of the situation and to realize that feeling uneasy is natural.

'Normal response'

"The first thing that people have to know is that feeling helpless is a normal response and that these emotions can last for a week or so.

"Another normal response is saying, 'I'm getting out of Los Angeles.' I really caution people not to make important decisions too soon. I tell them that their feelings and their perspective are going to change."

Peter said it is important for families to have some idea of what to do in a disaster.

"Some parents don't want to develop an emergency plan because they are afraid that it'll alarm the kids, but it'll have the opposite effect," she said. "Children need to know that mom and dad have some sort of plan to protect them. Children are going to be looking more toward the family for security while adults are more prone to retreat into themselves."

Peter said this does not mean adults do not need people to help them adjust to the situation.

"It's important that you make sure that you have some sort of support system in place. If you have a forum to discuss your feelings, you are dealing with them quicker."