

An Unwelcome Olympic Event

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Questions to Consider While Reading:

1. The author describes the use of a “daily Olympic Prayer” sent to all employees to help them keep calm and focused on their tasks as they prepared for the Summer Olympics. Would this method of support be helpful to you if you were a hospital employee in a similar situation? If not, what method(s) of support might be helpful to you and others experiencing such stressful circumstances?
2. The author describes having to answer the telephone calls from families in search of their loved ones following the bombing. How prepared is your facility to accommodate a large influx of telephone calls from individuals seeking information about missing loved ones or the incident itself? Describe some of the challenges hotline staff face in taking incoming calls related to a mass casualty/fatality incident?
3. What if you are assigned to a hotline to support hotline staff? What are some of the ways you might provide support to hotline workers? In considering the challenges you identified in the first question, how might you advocate on behalf of hotline workers so that some of their stress may be alleviated?

We had been preparing for this event for 4 years. As Atlanta Olympic Games neared, planners remembered the terrorism from Arab Commandos at the Munich Olympic Games in 1972, and sought to be prepared for the worst. They put additional trained personnel and the most sophisticated security systems in place to prevent such a horrible thing from happening again.

As one of the designated hospitals for the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games, Piedmont Hospital was only a short distance from many of the downtown venues and Centennial Park, and had a lengthy notebook of information and instructions for all employees at Piedmont to know and have at their disposal.

We were prepared for just about anything. It was an exciting time, but an anxious time as well. Our Disaster Plan was in place, having had several disaster drills to prepare us. Just a week before the Olympics, our hospital had a bomb scare. Though the bomb was not live, the fear employees and patients felt that day was very real. It put us even more on alert than we had been before.

Because of the anxiety of more than just a few employees, we decided to have a daily prayer vigil prior to and during the Olympics at Noon each day. While the excitement of having the Olympic games here was quite high, the anxiety of much of our staff was palpable as well.

We also began a daily email Olympic Prayer to all employees to help us keep calm and focused on each of our tasks. We were on a level of alert we had never experienced. Everyone in Atlanta wanted ours to be declared the best games ever, especially since it was the Centennial year. As one of the designated hospitals for the Olympics, we at Piedmont Hospital felt a significant responsibility in helping that happen.

My family and I had been downtown at Centennial Park earlier that Friday evening of July 28th for one of the many concerts held there during the Olympics. Also our sons had become fixated on Olympic pin trading, so we had been to the Park on numerous occasions so they could spend time trying to trade pins. It was a fun and memorable time for them and us.

After I had gone to bed that night, my wife Linda stayed up to watch highlights of the events that day. About 12:30am, she came and woke me and said a bomb had exploded in Centennial Park. There was no report of the number of casualties yet. I jumped up out of bed and began to fumble to find something presentable to put on. I remember the anger I felt that someone would dare to mar the good will these wonderful games promoted in the world. Linda asked if I was going to call the hospital first before going, to which I replied, “No use, you couldn’t get through if you wanted to.”

As I arrived at the hospital, the staff had already implemented our Disaster Plan. The skeleton staff for the weekend was continuing to call in other surgeons and staff to assist with casualties and curiosity seekers. The Emergency Room was chaotic, but our staff remembered what we had rehearsed many times and went into our Disaster Plan.

They set about assessing whose injuries were emergent and whose were superficial. Pastoral Care and Social Services were in charge of making sure the family center was set up with phones and support staff to comfort anxious family members. Before we could even get organized, people began pouring in. It was easy to get wrapped up in the frantic frenzy of confusion and chaos, but I kept telling myself that I was to be a representative of peace and comfort for these people. I was appointed to help bring a sense of organization in the chaos, focus and calm in the confusion.

Initially, those who came in were family members and friends of those thought to be injured in the bombing. Some were relieved to find out that their loved ones were not here. Others were angry that we might be withholding information from them. Still others were concerned that their loved ones might be in another hospital, and some of them were.

We quickly set up a connection with chaplains in the three other hospitals that were receiving the injured, so that we could give families news quicker about their loved ones and where they might be.

As families and friends continued to trickle in, the phones began to ring. Families of loved ones who had come to Atlanta for the Olympics were concerned that their family member may be one of those who were injured. The calls came from Atlanta, and Birmingham, and New York, and Texas, and California, and yes, Germany. I remember a frantic mom who could not reach her daughter. She was sobbing on the phone and nothing I said seemed to comfort her. I learned that there are times when people are absolutely comfortless, and nothing I say, no matter how genuine, will change that.

Telephonic pastoral care took on a new meaning for me that night. I was mentally exhausted from listening to the constant barrage of frantic and tearful relatives. I was weary of hearing the same story over and over again. There was no one to relieve the five of us who were receiving calls. I finally began trying to make the conversations caring but short. I needed a BREAK! I felt as though emotionally I was being held under water and I could not get my breath. I was suffering from "Compassion Fatigue" and I knew it. I was at a point of wanting to say "Enough already!" While at the same time I felt guilty for thinking that way. I was supposed to care about everybody as a chaplain. After all, that's what chaplains do.

Finally about 1pm that next afternoon several people came to relieve us. Phone calls continued to come throughout the day from all over the world. By 5PM that day we had logged some 750 phone calls in all. Many of the calls were from individuals who could not reach their loved ones, while others were family members or friends of those injured. Because most of the phone lines were jammed with calls, many people could not get through to their loved ones, whether by land line or cell phone. Each of us working that night acknowledged our physical exhaustion from lack of sleep, and our emotional exhaustion from listening and trying to calm anxieties and connect family and friends with their loved ones.

I felt particularly moved by all those hospital staff and volunteers from the community who came to help. Some had counseling expertise, while others came because they cared.

It showed me that when crisis comes, the true colors of individuals come out. Priorities seemed to change in most cases so that what really mattered in life came to the top. People came together no matter what the culture, the race, the faith or the language. True beauty flourished even in the ugly tragedy of that night.

It was difficult for me to sleep that next night because of the nightmare we had all just lived. Our worst fears had been realized. We were feeling the paranoia and anxiety we had hoped would not come. But it did come, and we had to deal with it. Anger, frustration, fear and confusion were all tangled together inside of me, yet I was also grateful that others were not hurt any worse than they were.

When I came back to work on Monday morning, everything appeared as though nothing had ever happened. But those who had been there over that horrible weekend knew that Piedmont Hospital was not the same. We in Atlanta now had the same tragic scar as the Munich Games. I felt embarrassed, angry and sad about that. My excitement about the games had turned to caution. I was no longer the innocent child in denial that it would really happen to us. I was suffering from my own form of Post Traumatic Stress.

As I searched through memorabilia of these days, I ran across an email I had sent to other employees the Monday after the bombing. It included a portion of Psalm 37 in it. It comforted me that day and hopefully those who read it. A portion of it read like this:

Trust in the Lord and do good; live in the land and be safe.
Seek your happiness in the Lord, and he will give you your heart's desire.
Be patient and wait for the Lord to act;
Don't be worried about those who prosper,
or those who succeed in their evil plans.

Don't give in to worry or anger;
It only leads to trouble.
Those who trust in the Lord will possess the land;
But the wicked will be driven out.

Soon the wicked will disappear;
You may look for them, but you won't find them.
But the humble will possess the land
And enjoy prosperity and peace.

I was reminded that no matter where one is, tragedy and terrorism are always possibilities. Yet I was also reminded that despite times where tragedy, injustice and terrorism happen, there are also possibilities for redemption, justice, or revenge. Sometimes life is not fair, but our being an instrument of peace can help bring another person resolution, though it may never resolve the unfairness.

Strangely enough, redemption often seems to come out of tragedy. In the end, I was grateful that we had the opportunity to not only "welcome the world," but to comfort part of the world as well. We were able to touch life with many diverse cultures, languages and faiths, in joy as well as in sorrow. Thus the goal of the games to bring the world together was realized despite the bombing, perhaps even more so because of it. What a privilege to have been part of it.