

# THE MINDFUL WORD

by Diana Raab, Ph.D.

## Mudslides Musings and Survivor's Guilt – Five Weeks Later

More than four weeks have now passed since the mudslide disaster here in Montecito, but while that might seem like a long time, the healing will take years to come. Whether we've lost homes or loved ones or have had to evacuate, everyone in our community has been affected, and everyone is suffering in one way or another. We are no longer part of national-news flashes – so, to the world outside, it looks as if the event has resolved itself.

However, for those of us who live here, this is far from the truth, as we are witnessing massive changes to the roads and stores we frequent every day. Some of them have been damaged and are still closed.

Last week, a cousin from the entertainment industry in Los Angeles was visiting for the Santa Barbara International Film Festival. On a drive around our community, he said, "I've never seen anything like this; it's worse than a horror set at Universal."

To the naked eye, it looks as if the mountain simply tumbled down on our community.

Jodi G., of Jodi G Designs, and her husband, Johnny, lived in a house at what has been called "ground zero" – at Hot Springs and Olive Mill roads, where there is no longer a house but a lot filled with rubble. Jodi says that she has been in a fog ever since. "It's as if my very head has been buried in the mud," she muses. "I'm never depressed, but this disaster has definitely rocked my world."

People have been asking Jodi what they can do to help. Beyond getting the essentials for daily living, she tells them, "As long as everyone is being kind, looking into one another's eyes, listening, and having a heart-to-heart connection, then they are helping. We just need to show up in whatever capacity we can. Even if it doesn't feel as if it's enough, it is."

The idea of love in compassion action is not a new one, but it is something about which we need continuously to remind ourselves.

Offering love and compassion for local businesses is also important. Many businesses, already hurting from the Thomas Fire closures, suffered a double blow when the mud-

slide hit and have had to close. Those that are open are struggling, and it's important that we make an extra effort to support our local enterprises. My husband and I also had the opportunity to enter the area of our favorite hiking trail – Cold Springs – and the site was unrecognizable. What was once a beautiful trail beside a stream rich with foliage was now a big gorge, which, with a few more rainfalls, could look like a canyon.

There have been many upheavals in our daily routines. It's unsettling to try to go about the ordinary business of living, knowing that the places and things we have counted on are no longer here.

Gwyn Lurie Firestein is president of the Montecito Union School Board and incoming co-chair of the Human Rights Watch of Santa Barbara. Speaking of the mudslide, she says, "As residents, we're juggling our commitments to our community by trying not to let this disrupt our life in Montecito – but real work needs to be done here as the danger continues to lurk in the background." Gwyn was living in a hotel with her husband, two children, and three standard poodles for nearly four weeks. "While the way our community is pulling together is wonderful," says Gwyn, "what we're lacking is that we're not incorporated as a town, and we don't have a strong enough voice to determine our destiny. As Montecito residents, we grapple with who is in charge. We don't have a mayor or anyone to offer us hope to make sure that our problem will get fixed."

Some people experience what is known as "survivor's guilt," because they've survived the trauma in a life-threatening situation and others haven't. They feel that they were spared unfairly. Survivor's guilt is commonly seen among Holocaust survivors, war veterans, lung-transplant recipients, airplane-crash survivors, and those who have lived through natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires, tornadoes, and floods.

Symptoms of survivor's guilt vary, but here are some possible clues that someone is experiencing it:

- Having flashbacks
- Feeling irritable
- Having difficulty sleeping

- Feeling immobilized, numb, and/or disconnected
- Being unmotivated
- Feeling helpless
- Experiencing physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, and palpitations
- Having suicidal thoughts

In truth, it's not logical to assume responsibility for another person's fate; but feeling guilty is not something we can necessarily control, and survivor's guilt is a common response to loss. Although not everyone experiences this type of guilt, it's often a difficult feeling to shake. Some people are more prone to it, such as those with a history of depression and low self-esteem.

I feel blessed to be alive and that my home is fine; but, as someone who has had to evacuate twice in two months – first for the wildfires and then for the mudslides – I myself have had moments of survivor's guilt, wondering why some are lucky and some not so. I also recognize the wisdom in simply acknowledging the feeling and calling it what it is. "Time heals," as the old saying goes, and I do believe that it is true. But the key here is that, by definition, the passage of time takes awhile. As well as we can, we need to relax into the process with gentleness and self-care.

It's also beautiful how we've come together as a community and feel one another's discomfort. All this helps to restore ourselves. As Jodi says, "After a month, something has finally shifted in me so that I can actually work and be a little creative. I just want more minutes like these."

Here are some coping tips if you for dealing with survivor's guilt:

- Give yourself time to grieve.
- Remember to take care of yourself physically and psychologically.
- Try to be of service to someone or something.
- Remind yourself that you are not alone.
- Be patient.
- Share your feelings with those you trust.
- Try to stick to a daily routine.
- Consider journaling your feelings.
- Get professional help, as needed.

One more shout-out to the first responders – Caltrans, the firemen, the police officers – who have all worked together to keep us safe. And special thanks to the community-at-large for all the love and support while we begin to make sense of the recent disasters and restore some balance to our lives. We are still alive, and we are grateful.

#805montecitostrong. We shall overcome. ✨

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