

# Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

**My heart is broken by the horrible tragedy of the tsunami in Asia and India. I weep when I see the pictures on television, and wonder if any of those people will ever recover from this devastation. Do you think that any of these people can ever be the same again? I've given money to the International Red Cross, but is there anything else I can do to help?**

**-- Stephanie**

Dear Stephanie,

I share your great sadness as I think about so many people who are suffering. Occasionally, the images and the sheer numbers of people who have been and are being affected by this disaster seem almost beyond my comprehension. But then, I read in a newspaper, or see on television a personal story of heartbreak or of courage, and my emotions come roaring back.

We know that most of the survivors of this trauma have lost everything. Loved ones are gone, claimed by a relentless and unforgiving sea, homes are destroyed, and entire villages have been wiped out. Survivors are in shock and sheer despair. In addition to the challenges of finding shelter, clean water, medicine, and food, many are suffering nightmares, reliving the trauma through flashbacks, emotional turmoil, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. These symptoms of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) will, for most people, abate in the time to come, though it might take years, and the road to healing will not be straight or easy. Others will experience these severe symptoms far into the future, and perhaps, for the rest of their lives.

Several mental health researchers in Hong Kong are predicting that 15-20% of survivors may well experience long-term PTSD. Previous research conducted in the aftermath of trauma in developing countries suggests that the long-term psychological effects of this disaster are likely to be even more severe than this estimate. The scope of the trauma in South Asia is so enormous, that we can expect it will affect not only individuals, but the cultures themselves for generations to come. Outreach to individuals and communities will be essential for wide-spread psychological recovery. There is excellent information about PTSD at the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ([www.ncptsd.org](http://www.ncptsd.org)).

Do I think that any one of these people will ever be the same again? How could they be? How is it possible to witness the sudden death of your family and friends and ever return to the life you once considered "normal"? That life is now over. But, the human spirit is amazingly resilient, and I truly believe that most will find a "new normal." Most people will grieve and begin the long, difficult road of healing in spite of wounds too deep for us to imagine. This is suffering on a grand scale. This is what Emily Dickinson must have been thinking about when she described "a pain so utter."

Suffering has the remarkable capacity to open the heart and let in the bright light of compassion and connection. In fact, the Buddhist tradition teaches that it is only this

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broken-open heart that truly understands and experiences pure compassion or *tonglen*. Even now, there is grace among the ruins as nations pull together to send relief, as children across the world collect money to contribute, and as neighbors help neighbors in the midst of mud and death.

We can all make a difference in helping others in this world that we share. I commend you, Stephanie, for sending a contribution to help. Urge your friends to do the same. The healing will take a long time. Other news stories will vie for our attention in the weeks, months, and years ahead. Don't forget these people. Send your prayers and your love to those suffering. That is what you can do—what we all can do -- to help.

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com) or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at [www.fullpotentialliving.com](http://www.fullpotentialliving.com).