

On September 11, 2001, I was a disaster mental health volunteer on call with the American Red Cross in Greater New York. I responded that day and then spent the next two months working various assignments supporting those directly impacted. I accompanied families of deceased firefighters to Ground Zero to say goodbye. I sat with coworkers and family members of corporate employees who had worked at the World Trade Center and were “missing”. I talked with families living below 14th street who were displaced from their homes and in need of financial assistance. At Red Cross headquarters, I processed volunteers and deployed them to one of the many sites where we were providing services. I also spent a few days at the Respite Center where the workers ate, napped, called loved ones, and played video games to distract themselves. And, I spent time at “the Pile” alongside those working for hours and hours and days and weeks to find any remains they could possibly find.

When you are a disaster mental health clinician, the last thing you ever want to do when trying to provide emotional support to people reeling from trauma is to ask them how they are feeling. It’s trite and, generally speaking, no one wants to share their overwhelming rawness with a stranger. Your odds of getting others to talk to you increase exponentially when you are subtle. Very subtle.

It was a couple of weeks after the 11th when I was assigned to work the Pile. It was a challenging assignment because I had once worked in the World Trade Center in Tower Two and the experience hit a little too close to home. I had spent so many hours on the plaza reading, chatting with friends, sunning myself, and enjoying outdoor concerts during my lunch breaks. I had also spent an enormous amount of time under the towers in the stores and restaurants of the mall. Now, everything was unrecognizable. I felt like I was on a movie set and I wondered and worried about the people I’d become friendly with who worked at the shoe shine shop and the Ben & Jerry’s ice cream stand. Did they survive? And, many of my

friends and former colleagues who still worked there on the 11th had evacuated their Tower in just the nick of time to then see horrific things no one should ever see. Would they be able to get past this?

I had to put my own feelings aside to deal with later (still working on that two decades later). And, it was too soon for the iron workers and crane operators, firefighters and police officers, etc. to process all they were going through. They were in the middle of a major job and had to remain functional. My job then was to provide tangible assistance and mental health first aid, i.e. encourage people to take care of themselves in the healthiest ways they could. I made my way around the site, checking in with people and thanking them for being there. I handed out water. I reminded everyone to take breaks and get some rest. And, I asked everyone what they needed on that day. How could I help? Quite surprisingly, the two responses I got most were requests for Chapstick and chocolate.

Fulfilling these requests became my mission and a bigger challenge than I anticipated. You see, everything below 14th Street in Manhattan was shut down. I couldn't just run into a store to purchase some candy and Blistex for the very folks who needed every little thing we could give them to help them get through each day. They were exhausted and filthy, surrounded by death and despair, away from their families for long stretches of time. They deserved some Chapstick and chocolate, damn it.

I went to every site and makeshift set up with volunteers providing water and snacks and asked, "Do you happen to have any Chapstick? I really need some for the workers. No. Okay, what about chocolate? Okay. Thanks anyway." I repeated this conversation more times than I can remember. And then... I've never actually shared publicly where I got the goods... Then, I walked into St. Paul's Chapel at Fulton and Broadway. It too, had become a Respite Center. People from all over the country had donated clothing, blankets, rain ponchos, heavy duty gloves, cases and cases of snacks and water, sunscreen and... Chapstick AND chocolate! I had found Heaven. Pun intended.

I found an empty box and loaded up with all the Mini Three Musketeers, Milky Ways, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, etc. I could gather. I then loaded dozens of little Chapsticks into the box and practically ran out of the Chapel; I was so excited! Never mind that I had just kind of stolen items from a Church.

A few minutes later, I was handing out the precious goods I had procured. Every single worker I returned to was so grateful that I had gone out of my way to meet their immediate needs. I could see the instant relief on their faces as they consumed the little pieces of sweetness and soothed their dry and cracked lips with balm. And, lo and behold, these two little items were the very subtle tools I needed to create connections. Connections that led to brief yet meaningful conversations full of feeling. And it was just enough for the workers, people trying to cope with the most horrific event the majority had ever experienced in their lives, to get through the rest of their day.