

A therapeutic response

By Melanie Verran

TSUNAMI victims in Samoa will be better equipped to deal with post traumatic stress after a visit from nine New Zealand therapists.

The Trauma Recovery Team is a group of people trained in neuro-linguistic programming and experience in working with trauma sufferers.

In New Zealand, neuro-linguistic programming is considered an alternative study into how the mind and body work both consciously and unconsciously. It helps people understand the patterns of their own behaviours in order to accentuate the more successful parts of themselves.

On the invitation of the Samoan Ministry of Health, they will spend a week in Apia later this month training mental health workers and counsellors and providing one-on-one support for those needing help.

Four of the team members live in the east and bays and are busy raising funds to make the trip possible.

They need \$15,000 to cover flights and expenses for the entire group.

Parnell resident Karen Ross says the timing – five months after the disaster struck the Pacific Islands – is beneficial because the initial grief period has passed.

“It’s when they’re going to know if they need more help,” she says. “People may be experiencing flashbacks, nightmares, depression or anxiety.”

“It’s quite likely there’ll be prolonged grief, upset and tearfulness. There’s many families that have gone up into the hills, which are inhabitable, because they’re afraid of living near the coast.”

By training Samoans in the trauma process, the team is empowering them to help themselves, she says.

“We’re not walking in, walking out and leaving nothing there. What we’re giving them as a foundation is huge.”



Bound for Samoa: Therapist Karen Ross is one of nine New Zealanders heading to Samoa to help tsunami victims suffering post traumatic stress.

Photo: FIONA GOODALL

Team leader Dr Richard Bolstad has run similar training programmes in Sarajevo after the Bosnian war. But this will be the first time he’s worked with such a large team.

Elena Kostyugova, of Parnell, went to Samoa in December to meet some of the people they’ll be training and determine what skills they’re missing.

The group then tailored a programme to fit their

needs. “I think it will make a tremendous difference,” she says.

“It’s a three-day, full-on training. Some of those people are volunteers helping their own people and sometimes they don’t have time to professionally develop themselves.”

For therapist Lisa Gibson, the experience offers the chance to connect with her roots.

Born in Apia, her late fa-

ther was a matai, or chief. Her brother Jamie lives in Samoa and has helped to link the group to non-governmental organisations.

The Orakei resident says the trip will have a lasting influence on the Samoan people.

“It’s not just about the tsunami. It’s going to have a much wider social impact because things like rape, incest and suicide are still very much social issues in Samoa.

It’s still a tribal society even though they’ve got the western influence.”

The registered teacher says children deal with grief differently to adults and will experience different types of trauma.

Ms Gibson hopes to visit Samoa again to hold workshops training school teachers in the trauma process.

“The trip is something I feel really positive about and I know it will lead on to bet-

ter things. This is just the beginning.”

Ms Ross says if the team can reach the \$15,000 target, all nine therapists will be able to go on the trip. A resort in Apia has already offered to accommodate the team for free.

“We worked out that if 750 donated \$20, we’re there,” Ms Ross says.

To donate or find more information visit www.traumarecoveryteam.org.nz.



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