

New York-based clinical psychologist Judy Kuriansky, who helps children traumatized by disasters in Japan and other countries, speaks at an event during the U.N. World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai on March 16. | KYODO

**Psychologist connects disaster-affected children around the world**

BY [MAY MASANGKAY](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/author/int-may_masangkay/)

SENDAI – New York-based clinical psychologist Judy Kuriansky, a specialist in helping children traumatized by disasters, says the same techniques work for stricken kids wherever they are and that making them feel connected with their counterparts abroad is part of the healing process.

“We’ve used the same exercises and games for children who suffered the disasters in Japan and Haiti, and for children suffering the effects of Ebola in Sierra Leone. It can also apply to nonbiological disasters such as the nuclear crisis in Fukushima,” Kuriansky said in an interview.

Both Japan and Haiti have suffered major natural disasters in recent years. In Japan’s case, a massive earthquake and tsunami struck the northeast in March 2011, triggering meltdowns at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant. Haiti was struck by a massive quake in 2010.

Kuriansky, who is chairwoman of the Psychology Coalition at the United Nations, was invited to speak at the Children and Youth Forum, which was held as part of the U.N. World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction that ended Thursday in Sendai. The forum focused on how to empower youth in reducing disaster risks.

Founder of the Global Kids Connect Project, Kuriansky said she was happy to see the issue of ensuring the mental health of survivors mentioned in an action plan on the post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction that was adopted at the U.N. conference.

The 68-year-old psychologist first visited the Tohoku region in 2012, a year after the calamity, and held healing workshops with the Recovery Assistance Center of Miyagi, a nongovernmental organization, for disaster-affected schoolchildren.

She said she was surprised at how actively engaged the students were during her workshops and observed how open the Japanese students were about sharing their feelings.

In one exercise, children who caught a ball thrown to them had to share their dreams.

“One boy said he wants to be a president, another boy said he wanted to be rich, while a girl said she wanted to live happily with her family,” Kuriansky said.

One of her workshops also had children offer each other reassuring words, saying “I’m safe,” “You are safe” and “We are safe.”

“They think they are playing a game but it’s actually doing something significant,” she said, adding the simple techniques worked for children in Haiti as well as in Sierra Leone, one of the West African countries worst affected by the deadly Ebola virus.

What was particularly sad in the case of Sierra Leone, she said, was how survivors had to deal with the stigma of Ebola, with concern over transmission through bodily contact, whereas in environmental disasters, survivors could at least try to comfort each other. Still, her workshops helped them cope with the trauma.

“Cultures are different but kids are the same all over the world,” she said, adding a mix of games, art and music are simple but effective tools to make the children “feel safe and strong.”

Paper cranes made by Japanese children who survived the 2011 disasters were sent to Haiti for children who survived the earthquake there. Songs were also taught in their languages, making disaster-stricken children aware of their overseas counterparts.

“Kids feel connected and it makes them feel that somebody far away, in Japan or Haiti, cares about them, that they are not alone. It’s an interesting idea,” she said.

Kuriansky, who wrote about her experiences in a 2012 book titled “Living in an Environmentally Traumatized World,” said, “The point is the kids pass on the message to other kids” by going through the healing process themselves and helping others heal as well.

But one cannot measure the time needed for healing, as it differs for every individual, she said.

Although Japan has the capacity to help ensure the mental health and well-being of its disaster survivors, the public still needs to pay more attention to their mental health issues, she said.

“When we talk about reconstruction efforts, it is important to note that it is not only about building back (destroyed) buildings but rebuilding people,” she said.