

# Murphy's Laws for Overseas Disaster Response

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1. You are not God.
2. Safety first.
3. Disasters are predictable. Understand why.
4. Disaster impacts are prejudiced. You shouldn't be.
5. Everyone is a rock star in their own world. Treat them as such.
6. Do it their way. It's more sustainable in the end.
7. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.
8. Numbers are all lies, damn lies and statistics.
9. Perception is 90% of reality. Manage it.
10. "I don't know" is a perfectly good answer.
11. Go ugly early.
12. Concentrate on the basics.
13. Shoot for the 70% solution... and move on.
14. Shit! Trash!
15. Look beyond the obvious.
16. Wholesale not retail. Logistics not tactics.
17. Good-Fast-Cheap. Make accommodations for the qualities you can't have.
18. Who's your Daddy? Never forget it.
19. Consistency is key.
20. Sustainable good is better than temporary perfect.
21. Effectiveness not action.
22. When you feel like you're digging yourself into a hole... stop digging.
23. Excited states are inefficient and unstable.
24. It's a marathon not a sprint.
25. Rest when you can.
26. It's their disaster. Keep it that way.
27. Disaster Response On-the-Job-Training kills.
28. Don't experiment with other peoples' lives.
29. Know who's who in the zoo and who does what to whom.
30. If you think you see something critically wrong that no one is addressing – ask before acting.
31. \$50 a bottle of water; \$10,000 a blade hour; \$1,000,000 per day on station. Understanding what's going on... priceless.
32. Disaster prevention saves lives. Disaster response is just the cleanup crew.
33. Be in the instant; understand the continuum.
34. Leave while they are still waving with all 5 fingers.

# Murphy's Laws for Overseas Disaster Response

1. **You are not God.** Don't act like it. Unless you can raise the dead and turn back time, you can't solve all their problems. Once you've lost your wife, father, sister or son, your life will never be the same. Once you've seen your home, your job or church destroyed, your life will never be the same. Someone rolling around the street distributing humanitarian rations, tents or hygiene kits is a welcome temporary relief, but a Band-Aid on a sucking chest wound.
2. **Safety first.** When crossing the line of departure, "Stop, look, listen for the sights, sounds and scents of the immediate battlefield area." Before responding to an accident, ensure Body Substance Isolation (BSI) and scene safety. Flying overseas to a disaster site has the same risks times ten. What do you know about the country? Do you speak the language? What type of environmental challenges will you face? Do you have your shots? Is the area still at risk for aftershocks or secondary explosions? Rushing to be the very first responder can ensure this will be your very last response.
3. **Disasters are predictable. Understand why.** Disasters result when external conditions exceed the normal capacities of a society's response mechanisms. We know where the 10, 50 and 100 year flood levels are. We can calculate the building specifications necessary to withstand a Category 5 hurricane or a 7.5 Richter scale earthquake. Individuals and societies choose to build cheaper structures based on a cost-risk-benefit calculation. Think "*Three Little Pigs*" times the size of the vulnerable population.
4. **Disaster impacts are prejudiced. You shouldn't be.** Disaster zones are typically areas of opportunity where risk is unevenly distributed across the social strata. The poorer you are, the greater the risks. A disaster will impact one race, color, creed, and religion more than another. When distributing assistance, try to concentrate on responding to needs alone.
5. **Everyone is a rock star in their own world. Treat them as such.** You are a guest. Remember to say, "Please" and "Thank you." Don't insult their dignity; often it's all they have left. Respect the elderly; they didn't get there by being stupid or powerless. Respect the women and children; their presence is the weathervane to your safety and security. Respect peoples' possessions; it may be a rag doll or a torn photograph to you, but it may be a last anchor to reality for them.
6. **Do it their way. It's more sustainable in the end.** Leave your cultural baggage at home. Understand and respect their social mores and priorities. If they want the power plant rebuilt, don't concentrate on advancing sexual equality. If they want you to wear a headscarf to provide assistance, find something to cover your head. If they value feeding young men instead of babies, resulting in infant deaths – either get more food to feed everyone; do it their way; or move on. The idea isn't to force them to work through our gods, but for us to work through theirs.
7. **If it ain't broke, don't fix it.** Completion of the emergency response phase is measured by the return to pre-disaster conditions. For rich and privileged first responders, the "needs" of the affected will seem endless. Use their "normal," not yours. Figure out what was actually damaged by the disaster and focus your efforts to repairing that. Don't let mission creep turn into a permanent mission.
8. **Numbers are all lies, damn lies or statistics.** There are no accurate numbers for the first weeks (sometimes months) of a disaster. Numbers are paintbrushes organizations use to illustrate a need for their services. The key is not fixating on any one number, but combining all the numbers into a coherent whole. Think expressionist pointillism.
9. **Perception is 90% of reality. Manage it.** Information flows are the immediate, middle and long-term solutions to rebuilding society. Inadequate information flows result in erroneous cost-risk-benefit calculations, which are the root cause of disasters. Remember 9/11 or Katrina? The information was available, but the will to collectively share and respond was not. Continually ask yourself, "What do I know?" "Who needs to know?" and "Have I told them?"

10. **“I don’t know” is a perfectly good answer.** No one knows everything during a disaster. Admit ignorance and try to find someone who may. Begin looking for information hubs where commonly needed information can be widely disseminated. If you are asked for the same information three times, make a point of finding out the answer and posting it for all to use.
11. **Go ugly early.** Bad news travels fast; you need to travel faster. Get the facts; implement immediate fixes to address the cause; and develop processes to mitigate outcomes. Then broadcast widely. If necessary, broadcast before you’ve had time to put everything in motion. Redirect focus from finding blame to creating solutions.
12. **Concentrate on the basics.** Water. Sanitation. Food. Shelter. Health/Medicine. The human needs for survival are universal. You will never get in trouble if you focus on those. You get in trouble when you shift from needs to desires and then from desires to preferences. When people begin refusing assistance because it’s not the right type of rice or they don’t like your blankets, they are telling you we’re out of the emergency response phase and you can go home. Don’t become a catering service.
13. **Shoot for the 70% solution... and move on.** Life, limb, loss of eyesight. Everything else is gravy. Don’t get sucked into cleft palates or obstetric fistulas. If it’s not immediately life threatening, it’s not part of the emergency response. If all emergency needs have been met, find long-term solutions for those patients and start packing to come home. Promote reliance on local capacity.
14. **Shit! Trash!** 6 hours after you provide drinking water, it needs to go somewhere. 24 hours after distributing food, it has to come out somewhere. Before you can rebuild, you need to clear the debris. The mountains of useless donations need to be dumped or you end up with a constipated supply chain. What are your new sewage systems? Where are your new landfills? Prioritize the backside of providing assistance.
15. **Look beyond the obvious.** The squeaky wheel often gets the grease, but may not be the one that needs it most. Airway, Breathing, Circulation. A screaming person means Airway and Breathing are taken care of. If their face is red, their Circulation is fine. Move on to the silent ones. Check on your underrepresented populations. Ditto for clearing bottlenecks. It may not be a lack of helicopters, but special rotor head lubricant that’s needed. Wood alcohol poisoning may better solved by several cases of good liquor than a shipment of iron lungs. The box is already broken; feel free to look outside.
16. **Wholesale not retail. Logistics not tactics.** If you are physically lifting boxes as part of a human supply chain or spending time operating a forklift, you are wasting the government’s money and stealing a job from a local hire. Captains think tactics; generals calculate logistics. Your efforts should be improving the system of systems. If you can’t bring strategic value to the response, stay at home and watch things unfold on CNN.
17. **Good-Fast-Cheap. Make accommodations for the qualities you can’t have.** Logistics 101 dictates you can have only two of the three qualities at any one time. Think through how you leverage the limitations to your advantage. With limited airlift capacity, do you send out the water purification units or the anti-malarial bed nets? Do you wait for American grain to arrive by sea or procure it locally at a higher cost? Do you spend time, effort and money repairing the key bridge or continue to utilize helicopter airlift at 150 times the cost per ton? Everything! Now! – will only serve to cause log jams at the air field or sea port. Being able to step back and conduct the orchestra will allow everyone to play in turn instead of adding to the noise and confusion.
18. **Who’s your Daddy? Never forget it.** Stay on message. As an official government representative never go off “Talking Points.” If you don’t know what they are, then don’t go into details. “We’re here to help. Appreciate all you’re doing to highlight the needs. Please excuse me, I have to get back to work...” The last thing you want is for a personal opinion to contradict official policy. If you want to come back to the response with a NGO or as a freelance volunteer, feel free to do so on your own vacation time, but don’t mix opinion with duty. P.S. For the record, there is no “off-the-record”... ever.

19. **Consistency is key.** Set the bar low and measure success by how consistently you jump over the same bar at the same time in the same way today, tomorrow, next week, and next month. Less is more when reliably predictable. Because disasters shatter the daily rhythm of life, providing metronomic constants people can rely on speeds the recovery to social normalcy.
20. **Sustainable good is better than temporary perfect.** If it can't be sustained when you leave, don't start it. Avoid orchids in the desert. Think mud huts, not sand castles. Strive for Geico standards... so simple even a caveman can do it. Effective simplicity allows you to begin training your local partner to take over before you leave.
21. **Effectiveness, not action.** Be lazily smart versus stupidly active. Maximize other peoples' comparative advantages for overall benefit. Disaster responses are not an individual contest of "I am working harder than you," but how collective actions rebuild a more resilient community. Advertise other organizations' contributions to that greater good and people will flock to be your partner.
22. **When you feel like you're digging yourself into a hole... stop digging.** As soon as you feel like you are getting out of your depth, slow down and ask yourself, "Will someone expire this instant if I don't continue this line of efforts?" (e.g. Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation) If the answer is, "No," stop and back out or ask for help.
23. **Excited states are inefficient and unstable.** If you're not healthy, happy and sane - then you are part of the problem. Individually, you're not that important. The disaster response will go on without you. Screaming about individual problems to be fixed is more often driven by feelings of self-importance than a desire to improve the overall outcome. Concentrate on being part of the big picture solution.
24. **It's a marathon not a sprint.** Be quick but don't rush. Pace yourself. Staying to help a week, a month or a year might make you personally feel more validated, but the effects of any disaster are generational. The needs will still be unmet when you leave and the community still recovering should you decide to return years later. If you try to accomplish everything, you will accomplish nothing. Don't.
25. **Rest when you can.** Everyone has 24 hours in the day. Within the first 24 hours, begin instituting your rest plan. If team members aren't actively needed, force them to eat, sleep, and double check their equipment. They'll need to be at 100% when called to perform. Remember to pull your people off the line before they drop below 30%. If you let them drain to zero, they may never bounce back.
26. **It's their disaster. Keep it that way.** Don't make the disaster your own. You may be bringing the bulk of assistance at this particular instant, but you don't have to live with the consequences for decades to come. Local solutions are usually best. Avoid the temptation of enmeshing yourself too deeply into their decision making processes. They need to have ownership of the outcomes.
27. **Disaster Response On-the-Job-Training kills.** If you don't do this for a living, ask questions of people who do. Just as disasters locations are generally predictable, so are the trajectories of disaster responses. There are people and organizations that dedicate their entire existence to developing the knowledge, skills, experiences and equipment necessary to be effective first responders. Ignorance kills. If you're confused about why, who's doing what, where, you are probably unaware of the action's potential unintended consequences not to mention its probable 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> order effects. The bulk of deaths and injuries have already occurred by the time you've arrived. Don't continue the destruction process by initiating uninformed action.
28. **Don't experiment with other people's lives.** The way to hell is paved with good intentions. This is not the time for amateur hour or "bright ideas." Unusual applications are ok. Unorthodox applications are acceptable. Untested ones are immoral. If you wouldn't try it out on your own grandmother, don't try it out on theirs.

29. **Know who's who in the zoo and who does what to whom...** Disaster responses collapse the normal social strata and information hierarchies. Just because someone is not recognizable as powerful according to your cultural criteria (stars on their collar or hairspray and an expensive suit) doesn't mean that they aren't important or influential. The quiet guy in the sweater you push out of the briefing room may be their national Subject Matter Expert and principal speaker. The tired "farmer" you don't have time for may be the district governor bringing back critical information. Don't feed the tigers carrots or try to pet the cobras, you will annoy everyone and probably get yourself hurt.
30. **If you think you see something critically wrong that no one is addressing – ask before acting.** If the answer is "No, leave it" ask for an explanation. If the reasoning for "No" is unsatisfactory, take it up to the next level. If the answer is still "No" move on; act and take the heat; or quit... but don't get mad. Emotions diminish everyone's ability to be effective.
31. **\$50 a bottle of water; \$10,000 per blade hour; \$1,000,000 per day on station. Understanding what's going on... priceless.** The costs of responding to a disaster are enormous. The final cost of bottled water can increase 100 times, not only because of price gouging, but also because of the additional costs of transportation, storage and distribution. Ditto donated canned foods or other goods that have to be transported, sometimes thousands of miles, to their final destination. "Victory" is not about more flights each day, but how those actions move us past the initial emergency response phase and contribute to a sustainable post-disaster norm. Even as you strive to improve specific processes, keep an eye on the final goal. Rather than quantitative output of patients seen or water provided, focus on qualitative outcomes like host nation control restored; information systems established and inter-communal relationships improved.
32. **Disaster prevention saves lives. Disaster response is just the cleanup crew.** Disaster response operations are the least effective and most expensive way to tend to the injured or provide assistance to people in need. Folk logic says, "An ounce of prevention equals a pound of cure." The *Art of War* states, "One picul of local grain equals twenty piculs of imported grain." [(1:16) x (1:20) = 1:320] Thus \$1 of local pre-disaster prevention equals \$300 of overseas post-disaster response. As a first responder, you don't save lives, but react to a temporary acceleration in the rate of injuries and deaths that has already subsided by the time you arrive. If you truly want to make a difference and save lives, help create a cost-risk-benefit analysis that invests in stronger buildings, more equitable distribution of resources and improved information flows.
33. **Be in the instant; understand the continuum.** Just because what you do will be inconsequential when compared against the collective needs, doesn't discount its value. The patience you show a grandmother or the smile you share with a child may change their life and the possibly reshape their worldview. Do what you can, where you can, while you can, with the people you are with. Cherish individual interactions, not the numbers.
34. **Leave while they are still waving with all 5 fingers.** Start planning your departure as soon as you arrive. Set simple criteria for mission accomplishment and exceed them a little bit more each day. Ensure that you've identified the people you will hand off each project to before you start and know how it fits into the larger reconstruction and development strategy. When you leave, wave back. If you've done everything correctly, you'll have made a friend for life.