

“The Gleaner”

Healing beyond the storm

Dr Marsha Smith on emotional recovery after Hurricane Melissa

Published: Wednesday | January 7, 2026 | 12:06 AM

In the wake of Hurricane Melissa, the visible damage across Jamaica told only part of the story. Roofs were torn away, communities flooded, and livelihoods disrupted, but, beneath the surface, another crisis was unfolding.

Emotional shock, grief, fear, and exhaustion lingered long after emergency crews and relief trucks moved on. For Dr Marsha Smith and the team at Bahali, addressing this quieter, often overlooked aftermath became a central mission of the Hurricane Melissa Recovery Project.

“People were not only grieving the loss of homes and belongings, they were carrying invisible wounds: fear, shock, sadness, exhaustion, and a deep sense of uncertainty about the future,” Dr. Smith said.

“At Bahali, we believe emotional recovery is just as essential as physical rebuilding.



Dr. Marsha Smith, with a few of the young adults following the Bahali Hurricane Melissa Recovery Project hosted by the Newell High School in St Elizabeth.



Dr. Marsha Smith

Bahali’s work is focused on the longer arc of healing, making sure individuals and families have tools, guidance, and community-based support well beyond the immediate aftermath. Rebuilding is not only about restoring structures; it is about helping people regain stability, hope, and a sense of themselves.

NOT ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL

According to Dr. Smith, the weeks and months following a hurricane often bring a second wave of challenges.

“Many individuals experience persistent anxiety, jumpiness, or a sense of being constantly on alert. Even when the storm has passed, their bodies are still bracing for danger. Sleep disruption, emotional exhaustion, grief for lost routines, and (what she calls) ‘invisible overwhelm’ are common,” Dr. Smith said.

“These are not personal failings; they are the brain’s natural response to stress and trauma.

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What is important to understand is that these reactions are normal responses to an abnormal event,” she added.

Despite the Caribbean’s deep cultural emphasis on faith and resilience, emotional and spiritual well-being is frequently sidelined during disaster response.

“Caribbean people are known for resilience, resourcefulness, and faith. That strength is real, but it can sometimes create pressure to ‘be strong’, to keep going without acknowledging the emotional toll,” Dr. Smith said.

She added that spiritual disruption, damaged churches, broken rituals, and shaken belief systems, can deepen distress if left unaddressed.

“At Bahali, we believe that caring for the mind and spirit is not a luxury; it is a crucial part of recovery. When people feel emotionally supported and spiritually anchored, they are better able to rebuild their lives,” she said.

Individuals may experience chronic anxiety or physical symptoms, families may struggle with communication, and communities may become more isolated and less trusting.

These reactions are not signs of weakness; they are signals that the emotional wounds of the disaster have not had the space, support, or tools needed to heal,” Dr. Smith said.

Dr. Smith stressed that emotional recovery is not one-size-fits-all. Children often express distress through behaviour, teens internalise their struggles, adults carry overwhelming responsibility, and elders face profound grief tied to the loss of lifelong homes and routines.

“Elders often experience a unique kind of grief; one tied to identity and belonging. Our approach begins with respect and connection, emphasising dignity, intergenerational support, and cultural continuity,” she said.

RESTORING PEOPLE

For parents, the challenge is especially heavy. “Parents carry a double burden — managing their own trauma while trying to be the steady anchor their children need. Helping parents heal is one of the most powerful ways to help children heal,” Dr. Smith said.

One encounter during the project left a lasting impression.

An older woman sat quietly through a gathering, then said softly, “I have not slept a full night since the storm. Tonight is the first time I feel my body settle,” Dr. Smith recalled.

“That moment reaffirmed why this work matters. Emotional healing is not an add-on to disaster recovery, it is central to it,” she added.

The Hurricane Melissa Recovery Project offers clear guidance for future responses. “Emotional recovery must be treated as a core component of disaster response,” Dr. Smith insisted. She advocates for early psycho education, culturally relevant resources, long-term support, and strong collaboration between governments, NGOs, and corporate partners.

“If we integrate emotional well-being, cultural relevance, and community leadership, we can build systems that protect not only infrastructure, but the psychological and spiritual resilience of our region,” she said.

To survivors, Dr. Smith offered reassurance: “What you are feeling is real, and it makes sense.

There is no right way to heal, and you do not have to rush. Emotional recovery is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of being human,” she added.

As Jamaica continues to rebuild after Hurricane Melissa, Bahali’s work serves as a powerful reminder: true recovery is not only about restoring buildings, it is about restoring people, hope, and the steady ground beneath their feet.