

“The Gleaner”

Rebuilding hearts after the storm

Dr Marsha Smith on Bahali's emotional recovery work

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After Hurricane Melissa devastated communities across Jamaica and the wider Caribbean, sweeping away homes, displacing thousands emotionally shaken, much of the immediate response, understandably, focused on food, water, shelter, and infrastructure.

Yet for Dr Marsha Smith, co-founder of Bahli, it was clear that another urgent crisis was unfolding beneath the surface: the emotional and psychological toll carried by survivors.

“In the aftermath of Hurricane Melissa, it became immediately clear that while traditional relief efforts were critical, they were not enough on their own. 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,” Smith said.



“Dr Marsha Smith making a presentation to grandparents, parents and children at the Newell High School in St Elizabeth. **CONTRIBUTED PHOTO**



Dr Marsha Smith



Above: Smith interacting with children who participated in the Bahali Hurricane Recovery Project in St Elizabeth.

She emphasised that emotional recovery is not secondary to physical rebuilding, but deeply interconnected with it.

Bahli is a Caribbean-centred non-profit providing emotional support, trauma-informed guidance and accessible education to individuals and families, no matter where they live.

“At Bahali, we believe emotional recovery is just as essential as physical rebuilding. If people are overwhelmed, numb, or traumatised, it becomes extremely difficult to make decisions, care for their families, or take the steps needed to rebuild their lives,” she said.

RESTORING EMOTIONAL STABILITY

This belief became the foundation of the Bahali Hurricane Melissa Recovery Project, which focuses on restoring emotional stability, connection, and hope in the months and years following disaster. Smith often describes Bahali’s work as addressing the “long tail of emotional healing”, a phrase that speaks to what happens after the initial emergency response fades.

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"When I talk about the 'long tail of emotional healing', I am referring to everything that happens after the initial crisis response fades long after the news cameras leave and the immediate relief efforts slow down," she said.

She noted that while early relief focuses on survival, emotional wounds follow a different timeline. "Feelings of fear, grief, uncertainty, and exhaustion often emerge or intensify weeks, or even months later. The long tail acknowledges that psychological recovery is not a quick or linear process. That period can be incredibly isolating if there is no support. Bahali's work is focused on this longer arc of healing, making sure individuals and families have tools, guidance, and community-based support well beyond the immediate aftermath," Smith said.

Smith indicated that many survivors struggle quietly during this period — navigating disrupted routines, financial strain, interrupted schooling, and the emotional weight of seeing their communities permanently changed.

According to Smith, the weeks and months following a hurricane often bring a second, less visible 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," she said. Sleep disruption, emotional exhaustion, and quiet grief are also common.

"People are trying to rebuild their homes, navigate financial setbacks, care for children, and support relatives, all while carrying their own grief and fear. That kind of sustained pressure can lead to irritability, sadness, feelings of hopelessness, or simply feeling numb," she said.

WELL-BEING SIDELINED

Smith also highlighted what she calls "invisible overwhelm"— difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or staying organised. "These are not personal failings, they are the brain's natural response to stress and trauma," Smith said.

Despite the Caribbean's strong cultural emphasis on resilience and faith, Smith believes emotional and spiritual well-being is frequently sidelined during disaster response. "In many Caribbean communities, emotional and spiritual well-being are deeply valued in everyday life, yet they are often overlooked during disaster response," she said. Smith indicated that survival needs, understandably, take precedence, but cultural expectations of strength can also play a role.

"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," she added.

She added that disrupted spiritual routines, damaged churches, displaced congregations, and

interrupted rituals can leave people feeling unanchored. "At Bahali, we believe that caring for the mind and spirit is not a luxury; it's a crucial part of recovery," Smith said.

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Smith warned that trauma left unaddressed does not simply fade with time. "Unprocessed trauma does not disappear just because time has passed. It often shows up quietly, sometimes months or even years after the disaster," she said.

She described how individuals may experience chronic anxiety, physical symptoms, or emotional reactivity, while families may struggle with communication and tension.

"On a community level, unprocessed trauma can erode social cohesion. People may isolate more, trust less, or become detached from community life. They are signals that the emotional wounds of the disaster haven't had the space, support, or tools needed to heal," Smith said.

HEALING TOOLS

Central to Bahali's approach is culturally grounded emotional support, which, Smith notes, is essential for meaningful healing. "Healing does not happen in a vacuum; it happens within the context of people's identities, traditions, and lived

experiences," she said. Caribbean culture, she noted, already contains powerful healing tools. Caribbean culture, she noted, already contains powerful healing tools.

"Caribbean people draw strength from community, spirituality, music, storytelling, shared meals, and intergenerational wisdom. These are not small cultural details — they are healing tools. When people see their culture reflected in the healing process, they are reminded that they already possess many of the tools they need to recover," Smith explained.

Bahali's resources, including children's storybooks, coping guides, and community healing toolkits, are intentionally designed with this cultural lens.

"Our children's storybooks feature Afro-Caribbean characters, familiar landscapes, and everyday experiences that resonate with island life. Coping guides integrate prayer, community gathering, outdoor connection, and storytelling, while toolkits emphasise grassroots leadership and collective care," Smith said.

"Rather than imposing a foreign model of emotional care, we elevate the strengths already present in our culture," she added.

At its core, the Bahali Hurricane Melissa Recovery Project is built on a simple truth. "True recovery requires more than rebuilding homes. It also means rebuilding hearts, communities, and the quiet emotional foundations that help people stand strong again," Smith stressed.