Mental Aspects of Emergencies and Disasters for Non-Mental Health Professionals
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Today's Topics
- Causes and impact of stress
- Meeting basic mental health needs during a disaster
- Providing psychological first aid
- Recognizing and responding to a need for additional or urgent care

Learner Objectives
- Identify the emotional responses to a traumatic event (e.g. behavioral, physical and cognitive)
- Describe how clinical professionals should address psychological problems of survivors after a critical incident
- Define psychological first aid and indicate who is likely to need psychological support
- Recognize the red flags that indicate when to refer people for mental health care
Learner Objectives (con't)
- Describe the unique needs and concerns of special populations
- Discuss steps to ensure your own emotional well-being before, during, and after an emergency or disaster

What are the causes and impact of stress?

Causes and Impact of Stress
Stress is the physical and psychological result of internal or external demands or threats, meant to protect and support us during emergencies.
Physical Responses to Stress

Examples include:

- Headaches
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Agitation

Emotional Responses to Stress

Common emotional responses:

- Irritability
- Sadness
- Grief
- Nightmares
- Anger

Additional Aspects of Stress Response

Stress-related response also includes these pathways:

- **Cognitive** - difficulty making decisions, processing information, or concentrating
- **Behavioral** - strained interpersonal relationships
- **Spiritual** - strained interpersonal relationships
Mental Health Aspects of Emergencies and Disasters

All emergencies create stress, but those involving terrorism tend to produce the greatest psychological impact.

Dealing with Emotionally Difficult Topics

Emergencies are typically uncontrollable, unpredictable and unfamiliar.
They may cause serious injuries, loss of family members, employment, home, property and valued possessions.

Benefits of Providing Mental Health Support

Providing support:
- Eases suffering
- Preserves functioning
- Promotes resilience
- Assists in the recovery process
**Individuals Needing Emotional and Mental Health Care**

Aspects of disasters increasing the likelihood of distress:

- Lack of warning
- Serious injury
- Death of a loved one
- Exposure to graphic images
- Experiencing the event alone
- Possibility of recurrence

**Problems with Providing Mental Health**

Many people "see" themselves as high functioning individuals not in need of mental help after a disaster, due to social stigmas and myths regarding mental illness and cultural perception.

**Consequences of Ignoring Mental Health Needs**

Ignoring needs:

- Creates unnecessary stress, adding to recovery time
- Increases the risk of serious, long-lasting mental health problems
How do health care workers meet basic mental health needs in a disaster?

Providers of Mental Health Care

Assist victims and family members with immediate physical, emotional and informational needs as a result of disaster or emergency.

Roles of Clinical and Mental Health Staff

Clinical staff:
- Identification of mental health symptoms, and acute mental health needs

Mental health staff:
- Evaluation and management of acute mental health needs
- Provide brief treatments, medications, death notification, and bereavement support
Specific Mental Health Leadership Positions

Four key positions identified include:

- Mental health officer
- Psychiatric care unit leader
- Mental health support unit leader
- Staff mental health support unit leader

Primary Needs

Include:

- Survival
- Safety
- Security

Secondary Needs

Individuals not at risk should receive:

- Food, clothing, and shelter
- Family reunification
- Accurate and critical communication
**Reunification with Support System**

Reconnect survivors to their loved ones as soon as it is safe and feasible.

*Photo credit: FEMA*

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**Providing Accurate and Critical Communication**

Information, education and communication are all integral components of early intervention after a disaster.

*Photo credit: FEMA*

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**Mental Health Triage**

The goal is to provide early psychological intervention by assessing an individual’s psychological status.

*Photo credit: FEMA*
How is psychological first aid used during a disaster?

Psychological Reactions to Emergencies and Disasters

Psychological reactions to an emergency or disaster encompass a range of emotional, behavioral and cognitive reactions.

Photo credit: FEMA

Psychological First Aid (PFA)

Those most likely to need PFA:
- Are concerned about family and friends
- Have prior history of mental health issues
- Are injured victims of the event
- Directly witnessed death or serious injury
- Experienced loss or trauma prior to event
Providing PFA

General principles of PFA:
- Protect
- Direct
- Connect

Photo credit: FEMA

Listening Skills

Tips when listening:
- Do not interrupt
- Demonstrate respect
- Acknowledge emotions
- Allow for silence
- Show attention
- Paraphrase

How do heath care workers recognize the need for additional or urgent care?
**Appropriate Evaluation and Treatment**

When evaluating:
- Always conduct medical triage first
- Look for signs of extreme mental distress warranting referral

![Photo credit: FEMA](image1.png)

**Reactions Indicating Additional Needs**

Examples of some symptoms include:
- Difficulty thinking clearly
- Not acting logically
- Lacking awareness of reality
- Displaying confusion
- Haunted by images of event

![Photo credit: FEMA](image2.png)

**Referrals for Additional Care**

Immediate referral is needed when the person is:
- Disoriented
- Hearing voices, seeing visions
- Exhibiting suicidal tendencies
- Inappropriately angry
- Exhibiting “flat” emotions
- Crying excessively
- Regressing developmentally

![Photo credit: FEMA](image3.png)
Providing Emotional Support to the Elderly

Hearing difficulties or processing delays may make older persons seem as though they need psychological assistance, when they actually need physiological assistance.

Providing Emotional Support to Children

Strategies for assisting children:

- Sensitivity to child’s cultural, ethnic, and racial experiences
- Responding in a way that is sensitive to child’s level of development
- Providing activities for expression of feelings

Providing Emotional Support to People with Disabilities

Health care professionals need to be aware of the special needs of survivors who were physically challenged before the disaster.
Providing Emotional Support to Non-English Speakers

It is important to have interpreters on site who are involved with the initial assessment stages.

Cultural Considerations

Ability to understand and respond effectively to the cultural and linguistic needs of individuals and families affected by a disaster.

How do health care workers protect their own mental health during response to a disaster?
Taking Care of Yourself

Strategies for self care:
- Take breaks, eat, and sleep
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Work on a rotation basis
- Avoid substituting stimulants for sleep
- Keep a routine
- Get support if you become overwhelmed

Help from Supervisors

Supervisors and Incident Command are in charge of providing structure and team support to ensure employee safety.

Strategies for Steps Toward Recovery

Suggested steps for recovery:
- Reach out to others
- Keep a journal
- Avoid making big decisions
- Allow time to recover
- Laugh
- Avoid drugs and alcohol
- Eat, sleep, and exercise
Questions?

Thank You for Your Participation

Contact Information

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