

WORKING WITH COMMON REACTIONS TO DISASTER

Chapter 4

INTRODUCTION

Reactions to disasters range from experiencing what can be called normal stress to the less common chronic and severe post traumatic stress sequelae. Also, disaster victims may experience bereavement because of a loss of loved ones, property, or some other attachment. This chapter helps the mental health worker identify the victimized individual's reaction and gives some hints on developing an effective intervention. The signs and symptoms listed are not all-inclusive, but are representative of the types that may be seen in outreach work.

STRESS

Most, if not all, disaster victims will experience stress in reaction to the event and/or as part of the subsequent rebuilding process. The length, type, or severity of the stress response varies among people depending on factors such as:

- perception of the event
- perception of the consequences
- personal resources
- social support
- degree of loss

Some common signs of stress are:

Cognitive

- lower attention span
- poor concentration
- memory problems
- uncertainty
- impulsive decisions

Emotional

- emotional lability
- agitation
- irritability
- feeling overwhelmed
- apprehension

Behavioral

- impulsive outbursts
- change in activity
- muscle tension, spasm or pain
- increased movement
- chronic complaining

The physical cost of stress may be illness. Below are several physical signs of stress which disaster victims should share with a physician:

- tachycardia (rapid heart rate)
- chest pain
- increased illness (e.g. colds)
- increased blood pressure
- chronic fatigue
- digestive problems

In common stress reactions, outreach workers should concentrate their efforts on helping victims solve practical problems in adjusting to a changed family, home, and/or community. These problems may include locating financial resources, health care, contractors, etc. This initial concentration on concrete problems of adjustment helps build rapport and may allow the individual to discuss emotional issues as they arise.

POST TRAUMATIC STRESS

Disaster victims are vulnerable to a particular stress reaction pattern known as post traumatic stress sequelae. Many victims experience symptoms shortly after impact, but in some individuals, the symptoms may not appear for several months. Common signs are:

- intrusive, painful thoughts (about the event)
- upsetting dreams
- flashbacks
- avoidance of reminders
- difficulty remembering key aspects of the event
- feeling detached from others
- extreme alertness to potential danger
- startle reactions

The outreach counselor can assist victims with traumatic reactions by:

- **encouraging** the expression of pain
- **sharing** the idea that their reactions are normal
- **explaining** that the event was abnormal
- **presenting** a relaxed time frame for recovery (several months)

Although severe impairment is rare in most domestic (U.S.), community disasters, when ongoing discussions with an outreach counselor have resulted in only limited success, a referral to a specialist in trauma recovery may be needed. Referral should be considered when:

- reactions persist with extreme intensity for months
- reactions appear periodically with extreme intensity
- reactions are vehemently denied, yet seem apparent to others
- **relative to other victims**, adjustment and functioning appear poor

BEREAVEMENT

It is normal for individuals to mourn over loss of life, body functions, and personal possessions. Common bereavement symptoms, or grief reactions as they are sometimes called, are:

- depression
- insomnia
- appetite loss
- weight loss

Individuals suffering from **uncomplicated bereavement** may:

- wish they died too
- feel guilty that they could have done more to prevent the loss
- wish they had not acted certain ways near the time of death
- feel the survivor is better off dead

Suicide potential should always be assessed as bereavement may mask a major depression. In contrast to uncomplicated bereavement, the bereaved who is also suffering from a major depression will tend to be preoccupied with:

- feelings of worthlessness
- marked impairment of age appropriate self-care skills
- marked social impairment
- severe decrease in activity level

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Individuals may suffer from both bereavement and post traumatic stress
- To resolve loss, **children** first need to resolve their trauma
- People may ignore stress, traumatic stress, grief, or reactions of family members.
- In general, help families with reconstruction problems before trauma and bereavement reactions caused by property loss, unless otherwise indicated
- Persistent or serious emotional difficulties may require referral

© Duncan and Kindler, 1992
All Rights Reserved