The psychological effects of natural disasters

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Key points

- Most reactions are normal
- Symptoms are time limited
- Recovery is a process
- Focus should be on facilitating recovery not ‘treating’ a problem
- Importance of building the individual’s natural resilience
- Mobilise local/community resources
Impact phase

- Feeling stunned, numb,
- Denial
- Survivors may show no emotional reactions but (if they can) focus on the basic task of keeping themselves and their families alive
Inventory phase

- Survivors assess the damage
- Search for others
- routine social ties discarded
- Functional relationships develop for the benefit of initial response activities such as search and rescue
Rescue phase

- Survivors willing to take direction from others for example: rescue workers

- Have a sense of trust that these individuals will meet their needs
Recovery phase

- Survivors may feel that efforts are not proceeding fast enough
- Survivors may react against their rescuers
Individual reactions

- Wide range of reactions
- Influenced by the event itself
  And
- By the individuals own experiences and situation
Impact of the event

- First or Repeated
- Extent of Loss
- Threat of Further or Future Disasters
- Level of Danger
- ?Loss of Life
- Role of the Individual
- Extent of Disaster

Impact

- Extent of Disaster
- Level of Danger
- First or Repeated
- Extent of Loss
- Threat of Further or Future Disasters
- Role of the Individual
- ?Loss of Life
Factors influencing Individual responses

- Past experiences
- Levels and types of loss
- Other stressors past and present
- Level of injury
- Personal resources
- Community resources and support

Individual response
COMMON RESPONSES

- Cognitive reactions
  - Planning and organising
  - Concentration
  - Memory
  - Decision making
  - Unpleasant memories
  - Self blame

- Emotional reactions
  - Irritability/anger
  - Anxiety
  - Distress
  - Grief
  - Depression
  - Guilt
  - Helpless
Common responses

- **Physical reactions**
  - Nausea
  - Aches and pains
  - Tense on edge
  - Agitation
  - Sleep difficulties
  - Vivid unpleasant dreams
  - Loss of appetite

- **Behavioural reactions**
  - Loss of interest in activities
  - Withdraw from others
  - Hyperactivity
Immediate requirements

- Most individuals have been functioning well before the event and will resume doing so.
- Role is to facilitate recovery rather than to provide ‘clinical’ interventions.
- Facilitate community recovery.
- Importance of community responses.
- Consultation.
Psychological ‘first aid’

- Providing comfort and safety
- Stabilising situations and reactions
- Assess impact
- Practical assistance
- Connecting with Social supports
- Linking with relevant services

(NCCTS and National Centre for Traumatic Stress, 2005)
Skills for psychological recovery

- Information
- Problem solving skills
- Promoting positive activities
- Managing reactions
- Promoting helpful thinking
- Rebuilding health social connections

(Hobfoll et al. 2007)
Factors influencing Long term effects

- Personal circumstances
- Available support
- Final ‘Straw’ effect
- Previous history of mental health problems

Powell and Penick, 2006: no first time major mental health problems a year later
Long term reactions

- Post traumatic stress
- Complicated grief
- Substance misuse disorder
- Anxiety disorder
- Depression
- Panic attacks

- Exacerbation of pre-existing mental health problems
- Increased vulnerability to the development of other mental health problems
Post traumatic stress disorder

- Recurrent intrusive images and dreams
- ‘Reliving’ event
- Acute psychological distress to cues of event
- Physiological reactivity to cues
- Persistent avoidance:
  - Persistent symptoms of increased arousal
  - Significant impairment of functioning
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case One</th>
<th>Case Two</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Second experience of flooding home destroyed</td>
<td>- Second experience of flooding home destroyed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- No insurance</td>
<td>- No insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Adequate finances to move and rebuild</td>
<td>- In debt since previous event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Extended family support</td>
<td>- Widowed no family</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Secure employment</td>
<td>- Unemployed</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Well established in the community</td>
<td>- Isolated since death of spouse</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- No links with the community</td>
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Children

- Presentation may be different as children do not express themselves in the same way as adults
- Behavioural changes
- Regression to previous behaviours
- Specific fears: separation: clingy
- Sleep difficulties
- Play
Rescuers

- Emotional first aid
- Brief staff
- Emphasise teamwork
- Rotate personnel
- Provide for proper nutrition
- Encourage breaks
- Phase out workers gradually
References

- Burke S. response and recovery after floods. Australian psychological Society 2011
- Newport beach fire department disaster psychology