

Disaster Psychology



Community Emergency Response Training

Unit Overview

- Examine the psychological impact of disasters on:
 - CERT members
 - Survivors
- Understand CERT members role:
 - Learn about possible psychological impacts to survivors and respondents
 - Manage reactions and work better with others



Unit Objectives

- Describe disaster and post-disaster emotional environment
- Identify the steps rescuers can take to relieve their own stress
- Recognize how stress and trauma manifests differently in members of a diverse community.



Understanding disaster and post-disaster emotional environments



Photograph Andrea Booher



Defining Disaster

- **Disaster** is a calamitous or catastrophic situation that brings overwhelming loss or destruction and requires outside resources for response and recovery
 - Relatively unexpected
 - Emergency services may be initially overwhelmed
 - Life, health, environment are endangered



In The Aftermath Of Disasters

- Some survivors are vulnerable
- Their sense of “self” has been altered
- The sense of security & self can be rebuilt only as it was initially built
 - In and through the connection with others
 - Power of presence
 - Gift of availability



Who gets Traumatized?

- The most powerful determinant of psychological harm is the nature of the traumatic event itself.
- Individual personality characteristics count for little in the face of overwhelming events.
- With severe enough traumatic exposure, no person is immune.



Psychological Symptoms

- Irritability or anger
- Blaming of self or others
- Isolation and withdrawal
- Fear of recurrence
- Feeling numb or stunned
- Feeling helpless
- Mood swings
- Sadness, depression, and grief
- Denial
- Concentration and memory problems
- Relationship and marital discord
- Inability to make decisions



Physiological Symptoms

- Loss of appetite
- Headaches or chest pains
- Diarrhea, stomach pain, or nausea
- Hyperactivity
- Increased alcohol or drug consumption
- Nightmares
- Inability to sleep
- Fatigue or low energy
- Lack of coordination

How can physiological conditions be masked as psychological symptoms?

Example - dehydration



Individual Reactions to Events

Group Activity

- Describe a traumatic event that you personally experienced
- What were your initial reactions?
- What were two things that helped you in your recovery process



Identifying the steps rescuers can take to relieve their own stress



Photographer Paul Roszkowski, USCG



Vicarious Trauma

- Empathy can become overgrown
- Over-identifying with survivors
 - Take on their burdens
- Occupational Hazard

CERT goal – Take care of yourself in order to take care of others.



Individual Well-Being

- **Transference**
 - taking ownership of the problems, experiences and/or symptoms of another person
- **Self-monitoring**
 - being alert to your symptoms



Stress reduction activities

- Rest & sleep
- Exercise
- Eat a balanced diet of frequent small meals high in protein and low in sugars
- Avoid caffeine & carbonation
- Balance work, play and rest
- Receive as well as give
- Connect with others
- Maintain routines
- Use spiritual resources

Maintain previous routines and “rituals”



The Four Basics...

- Eat
- Drink water
- Physical activity
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol

Plus talk about your feelings with a “safe” person



Team Well Being - Group Activity

- Define an effective team.
 - Why do different positions, personalities, skills, knowledge strengthen a team?
- Describe the primary role of the team leader
 - What can they do as team leader before, during, and after the disaster to promote team well being?



Team Well Being

- Emphasize personal safety first
- Stress management training
- Role play and exercises



Team Well Being

- Encourage rest and re-group
- Rest breaks away from incident area
- Eat properly and plenty of water...
avoiding caffeine and sugar
- Rotate duties... from high stress to low stress jobs
- Encourage sharing experiences



Team Well Being

- Phase out workers gradually
- Conduct brief discussion after shifts
- Arrange for an informal and/or a professional debriefing



Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD)

- A comprehensive, multi-component crisis intervention system, carefully based upon the assessment of group needs
- Not a stand alone event
- Voluntary participation
- Confidential



Locating a CISD intervention specialists

- American Red Cross
- Local Fire or Police Department
- Community Mental Health Agency
- Local Emergency Management Agency



Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

1. Introduction and overview
2. Ask for factual information about the incident
3. Ask for initial thoughts and feelings
4. Sharing reactions since the event



Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

5. Review symptoms of stress experienced by participants
6. Instruction of normal stress reactions
7. Closing and referring to professionals



Recognize how stress and trauma manifests differently in members of a diverse community



Disaster Myths

“It’s not Hollywood”

- Panic Flight
- Looting
- Price Gouging
- Contagion
- Martial Law
- Psychological Dependency
- Disaster Shock
- Evacuation Behavior
- Shelter Use
- Death, Injury, and Damage are dramatic and grotesque
- **These are all rare occurrences!**



Disaster Behavior

- People generally follow directions, when information is clear and concise
- Remain calm
- Do not panic
- Altruistic
- Desire to observe and survey damage
- Tell their story
- Become active in political process



Social Location

- Response and recovery to a disaster is impacted by where people are located in a society.
- Social location refers to a persons place or position in a society.
- The space and place people occupy in a society can cause them to have vastly different experiences from the same disaster.



Social Location - Group Activity

Describe your social location

1. Age, gender, family and cultural upbringing
2. Education and training
3. Physical skills, abilities and limitations
4. Community, neighbors, friends, and support

If there were a disaster while you were at home, how would your social location impact your experience?

If you were 500 miles from home, how would your social location impact your experience?



Social Location

- Injury
- Displaced
- Personal losses
- Degree of exposure
- Stuck in/out of town
- Newcomers
- Isolated “loners”
- Disabled
- Pre-existing needs, problems, losses
- Poor or homeless
- Cultural groups
- Primary language
- Non-traditional families
- Children
- Elderly



Elderly

- **Information limitations**
 - Electronic communication
 - Written communication
 - Lack access to public space and information sharing
- **Social isolation**
 - Personal
 - Social
- **Personal Situations**
 - Financial
 - Physical



Elderly

- Increasing number of elderly
- Barriers of diversity in elderly population
- Sensory deprivation
- Chronic illness
- Multiple losses & emotion attachment
- Stigma with welfare & bureaucracy
- Loss of residence puts some in a state of uncertainty



Helping the Elderly

- Older people have experiences that can help others respond and recover better!
- Older people are a great volunteer source for community service
- Physical reactions are normal
- Acknowledge feelings
- Ask and accept help



Youth

- **Preschool** (0 – 6 years)
 - Total support
- **Early Childhood** (7 – 12 years)
 - Will follow direction
 - Need security
- **Adolescence** (12 – 14 years)
 - Resource with caution
- **Late Adolescence** (15 – 18 years)
 - Resource but distracted



Photographer – Andrea Booher



Youth

- **How to help**

- Answer questions honestly and do not be afraid to admit where you can not
- Do not diminish child's capacity to understand
- Allow and encourage discussion of feelings and concerns without judgments
- Encourage expression of feelings particularly through art forms
- Focus on facts, not blame or guilt.



Social Location - Youth

- Remember cultural differences
 - Emotional expression
 - Children have a social position within their culture and may not be as apt to discuss
- Repeated experiences



Social Location - Group Activity

- Brainstorm as many potential people or groups that may be more at risk in a major disaster.
- Why might they be at risk?
- What pre-disaster activities could lesson their risk level?



Traumatic Stress

- About 10% of post-disaster population
- No time line
 - Immediate
 - Longer term



Photographer – Andrea Booher



Traumatic Stress

- Trauma responses impact
 - Cognitive functions
 - Physical health
 - Interpersonal relationships
- Personal reactions vary
 - Experience
 - Level of disruption
 - Cultural and social resources



Supportive Responses

- Listen
- Assess for injury or shock
- Get uninjured people involved
- Empathize
- Connect to natural support networks
- Referrals
 - Human Services
 - Mental Health
 - Spiritual care



Do Say & Don't Say Group Activity

- List some things you can you say that would be supportive, caring, etc.
- List some unsupportive expressions.



Resources & Referral

- Do some pre-event research of possible resources of help during and after a disaster
 - Local & Community Resources
 - Regional Resources
 - State Resources
 - Federal Resources
 - National Organizations



Local Community Resources

- Government
 - Federal
 - State
 - Local
- Businesses
 - Chamber of Commerce
- Schools
 - Public and private



Local Community Resources

- Neighborhoods
 - Geographical, socio-economic
 - Cultural, ethnic & language
 - Demographic age groups
- Not-for-profit Organizations
 - National organizations
 - Community based organizations
- Faith Communities
 - Ecumenical vs. Inter-faith



Unit Summary

- Describe disaster and post-disaster emotional environment
- Identify the steps rescuers can take to relieve their own stress
- Recognize how stress and trauma manifests differently in members of a diverse community.
- Who can get traumatized?
- What are causes of disaster trauma?
- Physical and Physiological
- Well being activities
- Social Location
- Empathy Responses
- Referral groups





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