

HOW TO PROVIDE PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN A MAJOR EARTHQUAKE LIKE THIS ONE.

Dr. Kapil Dev Upadhyaya, Psychiatrist and Stress Counsellor

An earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale affected Nepal, on 25th April 2015 at 11.56 A.M.. The main affected districts are of Kathmandu valley and neighboring districts of the central region and the western region of the country. Many precious lives have been lost, large numbers of people are injured, and rescue and relief operations are on. Because of repeated aftershocks fear and terror are there in the people of the affected areas.

Disasters like this major earthquake cause rapid destructive change, widespread damage to infrastructure in their communities, physical injuries, and the shared experience in everyone affected of intense human suffering. Such traumatic experiences mean that the particular state of being a human is severely affected due to experiencing tremendous loss through the death of loved ones, loss of body parts, loss of homes, markers of heritage, and sources of livelihood. Psychosocial intervention in disaster aims at the transformation of those affected by the disaster from being a victim to being a survivor.

Disaster victims not only suffer from physical injuries, they also suffer from enormous psychological distress. Symptoms of psychological distress may appear immediately after the disaster or a few days later. In some, symptoms may appear even after months. In the acute phase all the affected population can be expected to be suffering from psychological stress. Worst affected will be those who have suffered the multiple tragedies.

Psychological First Aid (PFA) has been seen to encompass general psychological support, protecting from harm, comforting, allowing those who wish to talk of their experience to do so, providing information, assisting with the whereabouts of loved ones and dealing with knowledge of what may have happened to them. When disaster survivors are gathered together in shelters they may not only comfort and support each other, but also share knowledge and experiences of what has happened. This mutual sharing and the affiliative behavior may lead to strong bonds, which can assist survival and recovery, especially when there is sharing with those who have been through 'the same thing'. This spontaneous or natural grouping, and 'debriefing' as it may be called, is not a formal process, but may be perceived to be of value in supporting those involved to deal with the aftermath of disaster. (Ursano, Fullerton, Vance & Wang, 2000.)

Psychological First Aid (PFA) refers to set of skills identified to limit the distress and negative behaviors that can increase fear and arousal. The goal of PFA is to reduce distress, assist with current needs, promote adaptive functioning; and not to elicit traumatic experiences and losses. PFA aims to provide emotional help to an upset staff member and / or their families allowing them to "let off steam" or "vent". Normally clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, stress counselors and trained peer helpers provide psychological first aid. In a major disaster, other staffs may have to provide such support to their families, friends, or in the neighborhood. It will be better if the staffs know Do's and Don'ts in such situation.

DO'S:

- Ensure individual safety like protection and safe location
- Help people meet basic needs like food, shelter, emergency medical treatment
- Provide simple , relevant, accurate and consistent information to the affected people
- People affected by major disaster are less able to listen to, understand or retain information. So the information may have to be repeated a few times till they understand clearly and if necessary request them to repeat it in their own words.
- Listen to people who wish to share their stories and emotions.
- Be friendly and compassionate
- Try to understand their perspective and concerns (empathy)
- Help people contact relatives and loved ones
- Keep families together
- Keep children with parents or other close relatives whenever possible.
- Engage people in meeting their own needs
- Find out the types and locations of government and non-government services and direct people to those services that are available.

DON'T:

- Do not force people to share their stories with you, especially sensitive personal details
- Do not give simple reassurances like “everything will be OK” or “at least you survived”
- Do not tell people why they have suffered by alluding to personal behaviors
- Do not criticize existing services or relief activities in front of Survivors or their families
- Do not make promises that may not be kept

INFORMATION TO GIVE OUT TO THE GENERAL POPULATION

- After going through a life altering experience like the one you have gone through, it is normal to be effected emotionally.
- You need to understand that: These emotional reactions are normal responses to an abnormal experience
- These reactions are common and experience by everyone
- Everybody who experiences a disaster is touched by it

WHAT WILL HELP PEOPLE TO RECOVER FASTER

- Cooperative behavior / neighborliness
- Concern for the welfare of others, especially the family members
- Trying to get information from reliable source, e.g. by listening radio
- Acceptance of the changes and the new life situation
- Sharing your thoughts, feelings and concerns for others
- Re-establishing routines and life activities
- Spirituality / praying / singing religious songs

SOME STEPS TO HELP OWN FAMILY TO RECOVER

- Stay together as a family if possible
- Take time to sit together and share the experience
- Comfort parents, children, spouse etc
- Contact close relatives, provide and take their support
- Resume gradually normal activities of the pre-disaster days

CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY NEED SPECIAL ATTENTION

Children can show behavior like irritability, anger fights, lying, disobedience, etc; which would all be ways of showing their anger at has happened. These changes are ‘normal” for the situation. Some things that can be done are:

- Re-establishing routines like eating, sleeping, going to school
- Actions like touching, hugging and reassuring verbally
- Listen to them without being judgmental or critical of their feelings
- Encourage them to play or offer opportunities for painting and drawing where they can express their emotions
- Pay more attention and spend time on their studies once they return to school.

References:

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