

Psychological Impact of Tsunamis

Tsunamis pose an extreme psychological challenge to the recovery of children and families, who may suffer life-threatening personal experiences, the loss of loved ones and property, total disruption of daily routines and expectations for the future, post-disaster adversities, and enormous economic impact. You may find the following helpful to know about the psychological impact of surviving a natural disaster, such as a tsunami.

Reactions to Danger

Danger refers to the sense that events or activities have the potential to cause harm. Since the 2004 Pacific Rim tsunamis, people and communities have a greater appreciation of the potential danger of a tsunami and the need for an effective early warning system. *Fears of recurrence* of any natural disaster can spread rapidly, fed by misinformation and rumor. When people sense danger, they increase their need to be close to others, making *separation* from family members and friends more difficult.

Posttraumatic Stress Reactions

Posttraumatic stress reactions are common, understandable, and expectable; nevertheless, they are serious.

- ❑ *Intrusive Reactions* are ways the traumatic experience comes back to mind, such as recurrent upsetting thoughts or images, strong emotional reactions to reminders of the tsunami, and feelings that something terrible is going to happen again.
- ❑ *Avoidance and Withdrawal Reactions* include avoiding people, places, and things that are reminders of the tsunami; withdrawal reactions, including feeling emotionally numb, detached or estranged from others; and losing interest in usual pleasurable activities.
- ❑ *Physical Arousal Reactions* include sleep difficulties, poor concentration, irritability, jumpiness, nervousness, and being “on the lookout for danger.”

Children often show some of these reactions through their play or drawing. They may have bad dreams about—or not about—the tsunami. In addition to increased irritability, children may also have physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains) that are difficult to distinguish from true medical concerns.

Grief Reactions

Grief reactions are normal, vary from person to person, and can last for many years. There is no single “correct” course of grieving, and personal, family, religious, and cultural factors affect how people grieve. Over time, grief reactions tend to include more pleasant thoughts and activities, such as positive reminiscing or finding comforting ways to memorialize a loved one. When a family member’s body is missing, it prevents the normal use of religious and cultural burial and mourning rituals and puts the family’s grieving on hold.

Traumatic Grief

People who have suffered the *traumatic loss* of a loved one often find grieving more difficult. Their minds stay on the circumstances of the death, including preoccupations with how they could have prevented the loss, what the last moments were like, and issues of accountability. Traumatic grief changes the course of mourning, putting individuals on a different time course than expected.

Depression

Depression is associated both with prolonged grief and with the accumulation of post-tsunami adversities. Symptoms can include depressed or irritable mood, change in sleep or appetite, decreased interest in life activities, fatigue, and feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness. Some people may experience suicidal thoughts. *Demoralization* is a common postdisaster response of utter disappointment and resignation to living with loss and hardships.

Physical Symptoms

Survivors of the tsunami may experience physical symptoms, even in the absence of any underlying physical injury or illness. These symptoms include headaches, stomachaches, rapid heartbeat, tightness in the chest, change in appetite, and digestive problems. Near-drowning experiences can lead to panic reactions, especially in response to reminders. Panic often is expressed by cardiac, respiratory, and other physical symptoms. More general anxiety reactions are also common.

Trauma and Loss Reminders

- ❑ *Trauma reminders:* Many people will continue to encounter places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and inner feelings that remind them of the tsunami experience and that evoke powerful stress reactions. Adults and children are often unaware that they are responding to a reminder and may not recognize the reason for their change in mood or behavior. The sight or smell of the ocean, hearing the crashing of waves, or television or radio news coverage of the tsunami could all be powerful and unwelcome reminders. When family members have been together during a traumatic experience, they can unwittingly serve as trauma reminders to each other, leading to disturbances in family relationships.
- ❑ *Loss reminders:* Those who have lost loved ones continue to encounter situations and circumstances that remind them of the absence of their loved one, evoking feelings of sadness, emptiness in the survivor's life, and missing or longing for the loved one's presence.

Post-disaster Adversities/Disruption

Contending with adversities such as lack of shelter, food and other resources, and disruption of daily routines can significantly deplete coping and emotional resources and interfere with recovery from posttraumatic stress, traumatic grief, and depressive reactions. Post-disaster medical treatment and ongoing physical rehabilitation can be another source of post-disaster stress. New or additional traumatic experiences and losses after the initial experience exacerbate distress and interfere with recovery. Likewise, the experience of the tsunami could renew any distress associated with prior traumatic experiences or losses. Improper caretaking, obstacles to family reunification, and delay in returning to daily routines, such as returning to school, can jeopardize children's recovery.

Coping after Disaster

In addition to meeting the basic needs for food, water, shelter, clothing and medicine, there are several ways to enhance people's coping.

- ❑ *Physical:* Promote reducing stress with proper nutrition, exercise, and sleep. The more people take care of themselves physically, the better they will be able to help their family members, friends, and community.
- ❑ *Emotional:* Reassure individuals that their emotional reactions are normal and expected and will decrease over time. Advise them to speak to a mental health professional if their reactions are too extreme or do not diminish over time.
- ❑ *Social:* Point out that talking with, and getting support from, family members, friends, religious institutions, and the community are very helpful in coping after a disaster.
- ❑ *Daily Routines:* For children especially, try to restore normal routines, including mealtimes and bedtimes as much as possible. Children feel safer and more secure when they have a predictable routine.

For children and adolescents' optimal recovery: meet their basic survival needs, restore their sense of safety and security, and provide them opportunities for normal development within the context of their family, community, and society.

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