

DISASTER INFORMATION FOR COMMUNITY LEVEL WORKERS

The recent devastating earthquake that rocked the upper Himalayan region especially Kashmir, is among the most destructive natural calamity in South Asia this century. Disasters usually leave a trail of human agonies including loss of human life, livestock, damage to properties, loss of livelihood, physical injuries and all development works. ***Along with relief, rehabilitation and the care of physical health and injuries, mental health issues are also of utmost importance that need to be addressed.*** In any disaster the magnitude of psychosocial and mental health problems are enormous. Apart from logistic and material help, the sufferings of human being will require psychosocial interventions.

CARE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Who is a Community Level Helper (CLW)?



Any community when faced with a disaster of whatever magnitude responds in its own way to the situation. One such response is the reaction of several local people or groups of people who immediately come forward to help in one way or the other in order to alleviate the situation. These people are known as the ***community level workers (CLWs)***. They play a crucial role in the relief and rehabilitation efforts in any community that experienced disaster.

The CLWs mostly are people who belong to the community and are likely to know the area well and have close ties with several people in the locality. This enables them to work in a sustained and intense manner with the community. These CLWs might include Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs), School Teachers, NGO/CBO workers, volunteers, local and religious leaders, etc., Generally these CLWs do have a helping tendency, but they often don't know what they are doing is right or wrong. ***The CLWs are a vital link between the disaster survivors and the several helping agencies (NGOs, Governmental agencies) that come from outside the community. Early identification of psychosocial and mental health problems followed by intervention will help the survivor to recover.***

At the early stages following disaster, most survivors are psychologically open and willing to talk about their experiences. This may change later into a defensive, non-cooperative attitude if time passes without attempts to providing help. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that survivors are encouraged to seek help and talk about their distress as early as possible. The CLWs need to facilitate in this process. In general, people do not readily or directly talk about their psychological distress ***they however do talk about themselves if adequate concern is shown towards them.*** Psychosocial intervention can be provided by the CLWs by making daily visits wherein attempt should be made to encourage the survivors to talk and express their

feelings about the loss, discussing about their health problems, organizing group meetings along with the other relief and rehabilitation spectrum of care.

Principles of emotional support

- .. *No one who experiences the event or witnesses the event is untouched by it.*
- .. *Disaster results in two types of trauma – the individual and collective trauma*
- .. *Most people pull together and function during and after a disaster but their effectiveness is diminished*
- .. *Disaster stress and grief reactions are normal responses to abnormal situations.*
- .. *Many emotional reactions of disaster survivors stem from problems of living caused by the disaster*
- .. *Disaster mental health services must be uniquely tailored to the community they serve*
- .. *Survivors respond to active interest and concern*
- .. *Interventions must be appropriate to the phase of the disaster*
- .. *Support systems are crucial for recovery.*

SAMSA, 1999

UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONAL REACTIONS OF THE SURVIVORS

As a CLW, it is necessary to understand the various emotional reactions that the disaster survivors manifest at different phases of the disaster.

Immediately after the disaster (*within few hours to few days*)

☞ **Panic, tension, anxiety**

The event happens so suddenly that there is no time to think as to what is happening. The immediate reaction is to run for safety. Fear is the predominant feature seen.

☞ **Shock or numbness:**



There is a difficulty in accepting the reality of the situation. Survivors behave as if nothing has happened. The person may be numb. At the same time confusion and loss of appetite may also be present.

When seven year old S lost both his parents and a two months old brother he became silent and his reactions were numb. He neither cried nor laughed. He stopped taking food and had to be forced by others to eat.

☞ Survivor's guilt

Some survivors experience feelings of guilt that they have survived but their other family members died in the disaster. The fact that they survived may cause them distress and discomfort.

S had found her parents struggling to get out of their collapsed house but had been unable to help them. She had a feeling that she should have saved her parents by helping them out, and felt guilty that she had survived and they had not.

☞ Relief, elation and euphoria among the survivors

Some would feel a sense of joy to have escaped unharmed where as others have been suffering loss.



Immediate post disaster phase (one month to six months)

As the days pass by new reactions appear and these are seen in about 40 – 50% of the population in the form of:

☞ Grief

This occurs in response to the loss of someone or something. Features like feeling sad may manifest this, crying often, loss of appetite and sleep, expressing death wishes and lack of interest in carrying out any activities, yearning for what has been lost are manifested.



For example, 33 years old M was inconsolable “I feel like why should I live? My husband is dead! Why didn't I die? I should also go to my husband. I do not want to live anymore, as there is no point in living after the death of my husband. I also feel like killing my child and killing myself”

☞ Apathy

☞ Lack of response to others

☞ Physical symptoms of anxiety like palpitations/irregular heartbeat, breathlessness

☞ Early signs of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which would include :



- Reliving the trauma in intrusive memories or dreams that are painful come uninvited
- Avoidance of all activities and situations reminiscent of the traumatic event
- Hyper vigilance (inability to sleep, being tensed always, always alert, being fearful at any sort of loud noise)
- Panic reactions

After the earthquake J says, “even if I feel something shaking or hear loud sudden noises I become very scared. I feel what if another earthquake occurs” ?

It is to be recognized and understood that these reactions are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.

TECHNIQUES TO BE USED WITH THE DISASTER SURVIVORS

☞ *Ventilation*

This process involves helping the individual to release the emotions and feelings that are related to disaster and subsequent loss. It is very important and should be used as early as possible after the disaster. It allows the person to release his/her pent up emotions and thus get relieved.



Things to be done to allow ventilation:

- .. Listen carefully and attentively
- .. Maintain eye contact
- .. Acknowledge distress
- .. Do not interrupt
- .. Never ask them to stop crying
- .. Provide support by physical touch like holding hands, patting on the shoulders when someone cries. However, the cultural barriers of the community should be kept in mind in this regard.

☞ *Empathy*

This technique involves perceiving things from other person’s perspectives and understanding/ realizing what the other person is going through. This holds true to the CLWs also.



Whenever a person is sharing his/her feelings, experiences the CLW needs to listen to him/her patiently and try to realize what the survivor went through by keeping him/herself in the survivor’s position. If the CLW is able to empathize with the survivor then the latter feels a great sense of relief of being truly understood.

☞ *Active Listening*



Good listening is an important skill to provide emotional support to the survivor. In the community, which has experienced a disaster, there will be lack of privacy and silence to talk to people. There might be lot of noises and distractions. It is important that as a CLW, one should practice active listening while working with individuals.

☞ *Social Support*

In any disaster situation the social support system gets disrupted, as an individual not only loses his/her family members, personal belongings and property but also his/her support systems like friends, neighbors and the community people who otherwise constitute their helping hands during need. It is extremely important for feeling secured and comfortable. It is essential to put in efforts to provide some sort of support through a bonding in terms of almost being like a family member. The involvement of external agencies and CLWs specifically can play a great role in extending an emotional support.



☞ *Externalization Of Interest*



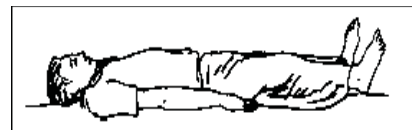
Emphasis on engaging the disaster survivors in some kind of activities that interest them in order to give them a sense of being productive. This helps in their recovery process. When people are engaged in same activities their minds are occupied meaningfully. Similarly, any sort of physical activity energizes people and makes them feel better.

When the CLW came to know that B liked to cook, she had given B the task of cooking and serving for all in the temporary shelter. B was interested in that activity and she used to cook and serve others. That helped B in overcoming her grief.

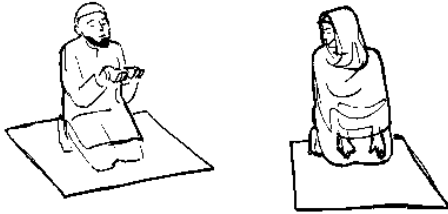
Similarly, when the CLW observed that M liked to play with other children in the temporary shelter, she made M the link mother for other orphan children. M used to take care of the children and this helped her to divert herself from her grief of the loss of her husband and children.

☞ *Relaxation & Recreation*

Relaxation and recreation are the two very important components that can facilitate recovery process. The more people engage in recreational activities, the faster and greater will be the normalization of their life. Engaging the disaster survivors in relaxation/breathing exercises help in the healing process. Encourage the survivors to undertake these exercises at least twice a day regularly. This helps to gain control over their anxiety.



Spirituality



Spirituality has a tremendous power of healing the pain and suffering. Thus it is necessary to encourage the disaster survivors to practice their religious beliefs and rituals. Practicing religious beliefs help in the recovery process. *For e.g.: organizing mass prayers or group activities.*

FAMILY LEVEL

- Family as a group should be encouraged to share the feelings, experiences and losses of the members.
- Encourage the family members to contact relatives. This will help mobilize support and facilitate recovery.
- Rituals like prayers, keeping the dead person's photographs, preserving the dead family member's belongings.
- Encourage the survivors to engage in meaningful activities as a family.
- Resume to normal activities of the pre-disaster days within the family.
- Support each other at home. Emphasis should be given that the family members should regularly take up activities together.
- Engage in recreational activities.



COMMUNITY LEVEL

- Grief resolution should occur at the personal, family as well as the community level. Group mourning is a process of mass grieving. It expresses solidarity of the grief stricken community and facilitates unity and collective action. Such activities should be organized initially on a weekly basis and gradually on a monthly basis.
- Singing folk songs about the loss that has happened helps the survivors to gather in a common place and share their grief.
- Organizing the survivors and engaging them in devotional songs or prayers, etc., is helpful.



The CLWs need to identify the group of people at risk who are rendered vulnerable after the disaster. These groups include:

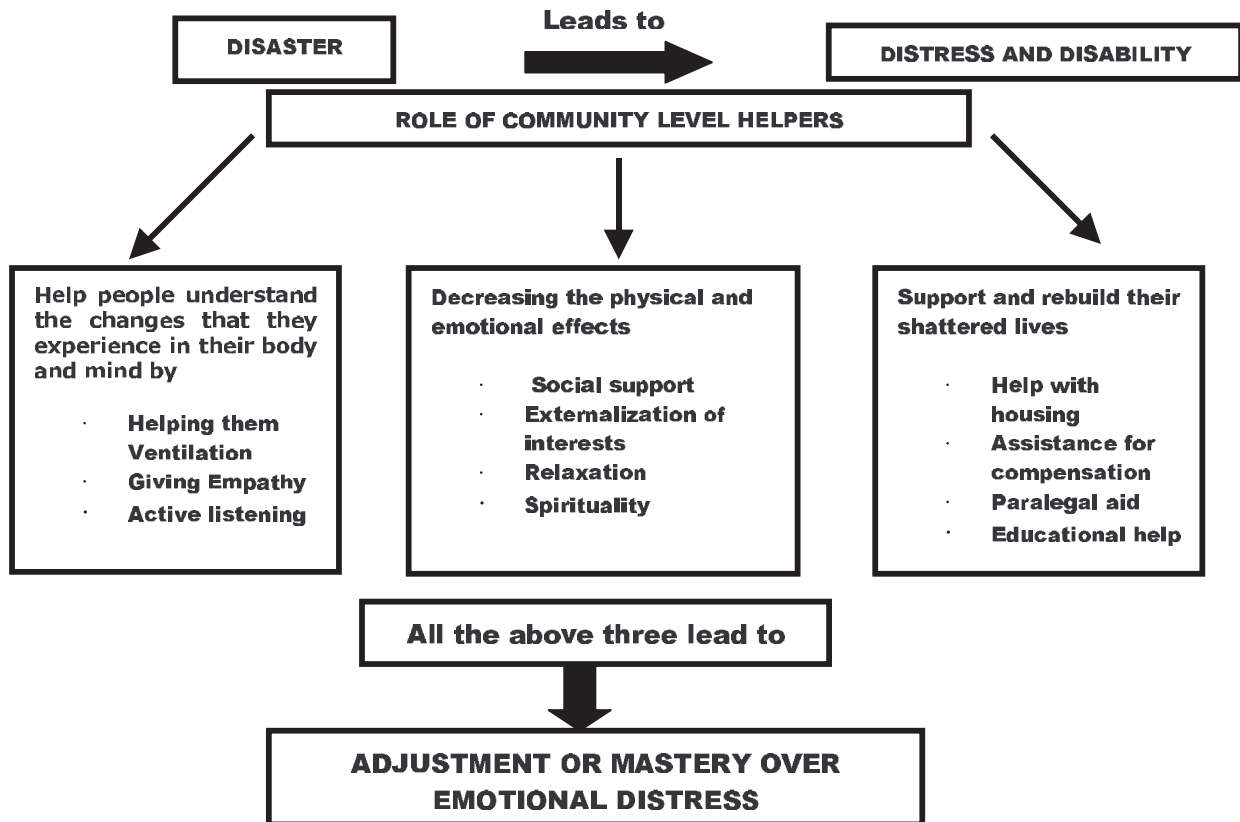
- Widows and Widowers
- Orphans
- Aged
- Disabled
- Adolescent girls
- Displaced people



Tips towards being an effective CLW

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| <p style="text-align: center;">:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Visit families regularly ➤ Help the survivors to get medical care or other help if needed ➤ Help the survivors in contacting their relatives so that they can get support ➤ Provide practical help whenever necessary ➤ Facilitate networking among the survivors | <p style="text-align: center;">:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Do not make false promises ➤ Do not take decisions for the survivors themselves. ➤ Do not miss appointments ➤ Do not get upset with the survivor's behavior. Sometimes they might be angry, uncooperative with you or blame you for causing trouble to them by regular visits or at times they might be very demanding. ➤ Do not overburden yourself with work ➤ Never take sides while working at a family level. |
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The following diagram will help in understanding better the role of a psychosocial caregiver.



For further information:



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