

TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH & PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN EMERGENCIES

Words matter when talking about the mental health impact of emergencies. In emergencies, people may be going through the most difficult time of their lives. Depict them with warmth and compassion and avoid showing degrading situations or ways that could put them at risk of retribution or stigmatization. Even when reflecting the extreme severity of the situation, maintain their dignity and support their agency.

AVOID TALKING ABOUT TRAUMATIZED POPULATIONS AND PTSD RIGHT AFTER A DISASTER

After a disaster, we often read and hear that all “victims of the disaster are deeply traumatized and suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)”. After a disaster, most will be affected but not everyone will be traumatized. At this early point, talking about people suffering from PTSD does not make sense, since this is a condition that can only be diagnosed weeks and months later and may need treatment by professionals

NATURAL REACTIONS AND COPING

Only a small percentage of the affected population in an emergency will experience long-term mental health problems such as severe depression, anxiety disorders or PTSD. Most will be able to deal with their reactions with the aid of their own inner resilience and the social supports from family and networks in the community. Mental health and psychosocial support efforts will further the natural healing processes. As most will experience a range of reactions it is important to understand that these reactions are natural reactions to highly stressful situations, and not necessarily a sign that they are suffering from a serious mental disorder or severe depression.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

The IFRC promotes a community-based mental health and psychosocial support approach including psychological first aid, reuniting family members, structured activities for children, safe spaces for children, ensuring access to information about reactions to stressful events and good coping mechanisms and establishing support groups. It is also part of the support to refer to professional assistance for those with existing mental health problems or who develop serious complications after the disaster.

TALKING TO CHILDREN

When talking to children in emergency settings be mindful that children are particularly vulnerable both physically and emotionally. • Obtain permission to talk to a child from their caregiver • Do not pressure a child to talk about things the child may not want to share • Treat a child with the same respect as if talking to an adult • Consider children’s right to privacy and whether it is necessary to use their names or photographs • If coming across an unaccompanied child, bring the child to a safe place where efforts to reunite it with caregivers or family will be made.