The Mental Health Consequences of the WTC Attacks

The NJ Division of Mental Health Services
Types of Traumatic Events

- Natural Disasters
- Technological Disasters
- Disasters of Human Intention
- Other Interpersonal Violence
- Sudden Traumatic Loss
- Serious Medical Illness
Typical Phases of a Disaster

Pre-disaster

Warning or Threat

Impact

Inventory

Honeymoon

Community Cohesion

Reconstruction

Integration

Coming to Terms: Working Through Grief

Disillusionment

Trigger Events

One to Three Days

One to Three Years

Adapted from Zunin/Meyers
What is Traumatic Stress/Disaster Stress?

- “Traumatic stress refers to the emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physiological experiences of individuals who are exposed to, or who witness, events that overwhelm their coping and problem solving abilities” (Lerner & Shelton, 2001)
What is Traumatic Stress/Disaster Stress?

- “Traumatic stress disables people, causes disease, precipitates mental disorders, leads to substance abuse, and destroys relationships and families. Additionally, traumatic stress reactions may lead to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

  (Lerner & Shelton, 2001)
Typical Response Patterns

- **Physical**
  - Shock symptoms
  - Insomnia
  - Loss of appetite
  - Headaches
  - Muscle weakness
  - Elevated vital signs

- **Affective**
  - Depressed, anxious
  - Numbing
  - Constricted affect
  - Guilt, shame, fear
  - Intolerance of fear response
  - Global pessimism

- **Cognitive**
  - Distractibility
  - Duration/Sequence distortion
  - Declining school work
  - Recurrent intrusive recollections
  - Flashbacks, Nightmares

- **Behavioral**
  - Clinging, isolation
  - Thrill seeking, counterphobic beh.
  - Re-enactments of the trauma
  - Increased substance abuse
  - Hypervigilance
  - Elevated startle reflex
Potential Long-Term Effects

- Free-floating anxiety and hypervigilance
- Underlying anger and resentment
- Uncertainty about the future
- Prolonged mourning/inability to resolve losses
- Diminished capacity for problem solving
- Isolation, depression, hopelessness
- Health problems
- Significant lifestyle changes
Factors Influencing Response to Trauma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-trauma Factors</th>
<th>Post-trauma Factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple traumatic exposures</td>
<td>On-going support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of mental illness</td>
<td>Opportunity to share their story</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low Social Economic Status (SES)</td>
<td>Sense of closure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intensity and Duration</td>
<td>Media exposure</td>
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<tr>
<td>of Traumatic Exposure</td>
<td>Substance Abuse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Re-exposure or re-victimization</td>
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</tbody>
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Interventions Are...

- Therapeutic
- Psychological First Aid
- A preventative measure
- Psycho-educational
- Supported by empirical evidence
Interventions Are *Not*...

- Psychotherapy
- To alleviate immediate pain
- A critique of the response to the disaster
- Necessarily one-time sessions
The FEMA Crisis Counseling Model

- Helps people understand what they are experiencing
- Helps people explore ways to cope
- Can prevent longer-term mental health problems by returning people to pre-disaster levels of functioning more quickly
- Normalizes people’s reactions
- Validates and affirms people’s reactions
- Offers practical assistance
The Purpose of Crisis Counseling

- Normalize feelings and reactions
- Help define and prioritize needs
- Help design strategies for addressing needs
- Helping to adapt coping skills
- Preventing future mental health issues

The Main Goal:

*Empowerment*- countering feelings of fear and helplessness

Exert care not to foster dependency!
Service Delivery Methods

- Outreach
- Consultation & Training
- Individual, group and public education
- Hot Lines
- Bi-lingual and Bi-cultural staff
Lessons Learned

- Symbols, rituals and spirituality are important in coping and healing process
- People have an enormous capacity to heal through natural support systems—don’t get in the way
- We need to overcome the stigma that surround mental health services
- We need to trust in the resilience of the human spirit!
Techniques for Managing Stress and Anxiety

- Limit exposure to graphic news stories
- Get accurate, timely information from credible sources
- Educate victims about the chemical or biological hazard
- Get back to routine as soon as possible
- Stay busy, mentally and physically
- Communicate with friends, supporters and family
- Use spirituality, and personal beliefs
- Keep a sense of humor
- Express feelings through writing, poetry, art, etc.
- Talk and share feelings with others
For more information

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