



What your audience needs to know in an emergency: Life-saving information

Topic-by-topic guide to core humanitarian issues

INTRODUCTION

These guides are for media professionals working to help audiences affected by humanitarian crises. They give a brief overview of common humanitarian issues in emergencies. They will help you:

- Understand what kinds of problems your audiences are likely to be facing in emergencies
- Work alongside relief experts to provide audiences with accurate, relevant and life-saving information

HOW TO USE THESE GUIDES

These guides contain information on core humanitarian topics. They are intended to serve as a starting point to help you identify the kinds of issues to address in your programmes and questions to ask relief experts. To help you identify which topics to prioritise, you should speak with local humanitarian specialists. If possible, speak with your audiences as well to find out what they need to know.

When using the guides remember to:

- Consider the local situation, culture and context to make sure the information is relevant
- Consider the specific needs of different audiences (for example, men, women, the most vulnerable people)
- Check for consistency with other sources of information being provided
- Consult qualified local specialists to check the validity and relevance of humanitarian information
- Use the guides in conjunction with BBC Media Action's Lifeline Production Manual, which contains guidelines on how to do effective programming in crises



PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

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What is psychosocial support?¹

Emergencies put huge pressure on individuals, families, communities and societies. They create new problems, as well as amplify existing ones. Psychosocial support is about helping individuals and communities to recover from, and remain strong in the face of adversities by considering both individual psychology and the social environment. It is about enabling them to deal with the impact of critical events and helping them cope in the future. Mental health and psychosocial problems are closely connected, and experts advise that it is critical to look at both in emergencies.²

Why is it important?

Helping people mentally cope with the impacts of emergencies is critical to their recovery. A lack of psychosocial support can lead to longer-term mental health and social issues, as well as decrease a person's chance of recovery during and after the emergency.

How can media and communication help audiences?

Having the right information at the right time in emergencies is critical to wellbeing. Not knowing what is happening or what to do in emergencies can cause great anxiety and suffering. Having access to appropriate information related to the emergency, relief efforts, rights³ and positive coping methods can provide great emotional and mental support. It can help people take action to help themselves and their community.

As the word suggests, 'psychosocial' addresses two main areas – **psychological** and **social problems**:

Psychological problems caused by an emergency may include grief, depression and anxiety disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). You can help audiences by speaking with local counsellors who give advice on these topics. Ask them what signs people should look for in adults and children to identify post-traumatic stress. Point out that it is common to feel distressed after a stressful event. For example, people affected by an emergency may notice changes in their feelings, behaviour and thoughts. Emphasise that this is a common and understandable reaction to an abnormal event.

Do not tell people when they should expect to feel better, as this will vary from person to person.⁴ Find out what people can do to improve their mental wellbeing (e.g. exercise, recreational activities, establishing routines etc.).

You can also help by speaking to local survivors who have found ways of coping, and then sharing their stories on your programme. People may suffer feelings of severe anxiety from not knowing what will happen to them and their families or how or where to get food/shelter etc. You can help by informing people what is happening and when help is coming. You can invite local aid workers, government officials and people in authority to give regular updates on the situation and guidance on what people can do to access services and help themselves.

Remember, existing psychological issues such as mental disorders or substance abuse will likely become worse in the emergency. Ask local groups how people with mental disorders have been affected, and what support is available for them. Share this with your audiences so they can help themselves and their community.

¹IFRC (2011). Strategic Operational Framework Psychosocial Support 2011-2015: IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support.

²World Health Organization (2013). Building back better: sustainable mental health care after emergencies.

³IASC (2007). Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings: Action Sheet 8.1, p. 156.

⁴IASC (2007). Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings: Action Sheet 8.1, p. 156.

Social problems may include family separation, disruption of social networks, destruction of resources and trust, and increased gender-based violence. As part of your work, try to find out what people can do to help themselves or to get help from others. For example, if they are separated from their families, speak to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to find out if they are offering **family tracing services**, and how people can contact them. Find out who the existing vulnerable groups are in society – for example the poor, marginalised, politically oppressed, disabled, women and children. How have these groups been affected, and what help do they need? Can support workers come and give advice on the programme? How can survivors get help directly?



Additionally, community structures or traditional support mechanisms may be undermined by the emergency and the resulting reliance on aid. You can help by sharing stories and examples of how communities are coping with their new circumstances – such as groups that are working together to share resources and skills, or examples of community leaders offering support.

Media and communication can play a key role in providing the elements of psychosocial support that have shown to be critical in trauma interventions. Keep these five elements in mind when making all your emergency broadcasts.

1 Promote a sense of safety

Find out what people can do to keep themselves and their families safe in emergencies. What should they do/avoid doing? Ask local experts what advice to give for the current emergency.

2 Promote a sense of calm

Who are the respected, trusted and known voices in the community? Can they speak on the programme to re-assure people? Try to use familiar voices, music and sounds in your programme to help create a sense of normality. Are there local psychologists or counsellors you can invite onto the show? How can people contact them directly for help?

3 Promote the belief that self or collective actions can lead to positive outcomes

Believing that it is possible to overcome challenges and find positive answers is critical to wellbeing. You can share examples of individuals and communities working together in a positive way with positive results – however small. Hearing stories of success from people in similar situations is one of the most powerful ways to instil confidence and motivation.

4 Promote connectedness

Feeling connected to other people in emergencies can provide reassurance, confidence and hope. You can help connect people by broadcasting a range of voices on the programmes (e.g. men, women, or different classes/religious groups/socioeconomic groups). You can provide channels of communication between different groups (e.g. phone-ins with aid workers and communities).

5 Promote hope

Are there any positive stories from survivors or aid workers that you can share on your programme? If not, are there any positive stories from past emergencies or situations you can share? Who are the local, respected voices in the community (e.g. local leaders, celebrities)? Can they speak on the programme to encourage people? Do they have positive words/stories/advice to share?

⁵Hobfoll, S.E., Watson, P., Bell, C.C., Bryant, R.A., Brymer, M.J. et al. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: empirical evidence. *Psychiatry*, 70:4, 283–315.

The information in this document is based on the following sources:

Resources

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2007). Action Sheet 8.2 (p163): Provide access to information about positive coping methods. Contains a list of key actions and do's and don'ts in relation to psychosocial support and communication.

Available from: http://www.who.int/hac/network/interagency/news/iasc_guidelines_mental_health_psychosocial.pdf?ua=1

Further reading

Hobfoll, S.E., Watson, P., Bell, C.C., Bryant, R.A., Brymer, M.J. et al. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: empirical evidence. *Psychiatry*, 70:4, 283–315.

IFRC (2011). Strategic Operational Framework Psychosocial Support 2011-2015: IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support.

Available from: <http://pscentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Standard-Operating-Framework-2011-15-FINAL.pdf>

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2007). Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings.

Available from: http://www.who.int/mental_health/emergencies/guidelines_iasc_mental_health_psychosocial_june_2007.pdf

The Psychosocial Working Group (2003). Psychosocial Intervention in Complex Emergencies: A Conceptual Framework.

Available from: <http://www.forcedmigration.org/psychosocial/papers/Conceptual%20Framework.pdf>

Unicef (2011). Inter-Agency Guide to the Evaluation of Psychosocial Programming in Emergencies. New York: United Nations Children's Fund.

Available from: <http://www.unicef.org/protection/files/Inter-AgencyGuidePSS.pdf>

World Health Organisation (2003). Mental Health in Emergencies: Mental and Social Aspects of Health of Populations Exposed to Extreme Stressors.

Available from: http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/640.pdf

World Health Organization (2013). Building back better: sustainable mental health care after emergencies.

Available from: http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85377/1/9789241564571_eng.pdf?ua=1