

# International Federation Reference Centre for Psychological Support

## Contact information

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Mette Sonniks, Director  
International Federation Reference Centre for Psychological Support  
Danish Red Cross  
Blegdamsvej 27  
DK-2100 Copenhagen Ö  
Denmark  
Tel.: +45 35 25 92 00  
Fax: +45 35 25 93 60  
E-mail: mette-sonniks@redcross.dk

## Background/history

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of ferry-boat and plane accidents and technological disasters occurred in and around Europe. In the relief work following these disasters, Red Cross and Red Crescent societies increasingly realized that the needs of affected people went beyond traditional relief, such as food and shelter.

This led to the First Consultation on Psychological Support (Copenhagen, 1991) at which an International Working Group was set up to recommend guidelines for the International Federation's psychological support programme (PSP) and for National Societies wishing to incorporate psychological support in their own programmes and projects.

The working group recommended the establishment of a centre to help National Societies and the International Federation develop and implement a programme for psychological support. In March 1993, the International Federation and the Danish Red Cross (DRC) set up the International Federation Reference Centre for Psychological Support (International Federation Reference Centre).

An important step in the practical application of the PSP and the new centre was the development by the DRC of a new concept of psychological first aid (PFA) and the publication of a manual outlining PFA. The International Federation Reference Centre was then able to begin helping National Societies that had asked for support in incorporating PFA into their disaster preparedness programmes.

In its first participation in an International Federation operation, the centre developed a PSP for the Chernobyl Humanitarian Rehabilitation Programme (CHARP), established after the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. After several years, it had become apparent that the programme required a psychological support component to address the increased psychological and mental health needs of the affected population.

The International Working Group's role is to be the professional advisory group of the International Federation Reference Centre. It helps organize the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Conferences on Psychological Support. National Society participation to these

international conferences, held every three to four years, is increasing: the first attracted five National Societies; the second, 17; and 40 societies from all continents were represented at the third.

Since the reference centre opened in 1993, psychological support in the aftermath of crisis – whether at the personal or the community level – has increasingly been brought into relief and support operations alongside programmes for shelter, food and health.

## Objectives

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- To help develop the capacity of individual National Societies and the International Federation as a whole to provide psychological support to people affected by disaster in order to prevent the development of severe psychological disorders.
- To involve the greatest possible number of National Societies in developing psychological first aid courses and psychological support programmes.
- To take the lead in developing PSP for the benefit of the entire International Federation.
- To develop a network of regional focal points, by (a) encouraging more regions to participate in the International Working Group, and (b) facilitating and motivating National Societies who have already initiated PSP in their society/region to become regional focal points.

## Brief description of activities

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- Developing PSP in National Societies: distributing material and conducting PFA training in cooperation with a National Society.
- Evaluating and monitoring PSP at both global and local levels.
- Facilitating the exchange of experience and information between societies.
- Publishing and distributing *Coping with Crisis*, a biannual newsletter published in English, French and Spanish.
- Facilitating the exchange of information and knowledge.
- Developing training materials.
- Advocating actively for PSP.
- Hosting International Red Cross and Red Crescent Conferences on Psychological Support.

## Major elements of the programme

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**Helping National Societies to set up psychological support workshops for the training of trainers:** Most National Societies contact the International Federation Reference Centre for assistance in the aftermath of a local disaster. After the event, the stress level of their volunteers and staff increases, and the local people affected face serious losses. This is an appropriate moment to begin implementing PFA. A number of National Societies has also asked for support because of their socio-economic situation or the psychological impact of fatal diseases, such as HIV/AIDS.

The procedure to set up a workshop is generally the following:

- **Preparation:** Initial correspondence; preparation of terms of reference for the initial visit; clarification of objectives, aims, target groups and financial input.

- **Action:** First assessment visit and development of a plan of action for the implementation. A second visit: this may be to prepare and perform the workshop or conference. Methods for monitoring and evaluation are also prepared.
- **Follow-up:** Follow-up on the professional aspects. Identify needs for professional support and how to get this support established locally. Discussion about monitoring the programme in order to make adjustments, if needed.
- **Evaluation:** Final handover of all responsibilities to the National Society, and the final evaluation of the process.

## Partnerships and alliances

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The centre hopes to create a global network of institutions with whom it has signed statements of understanding. At present, statements of understanding have been, or are in the process of being, agreed with the following universities:

- South Dakota University, Disaster Mental Health Institute, USA
- Nottingham Trent University, Centre for Trauma Research and Practice, UK
- Copenhagen University, Psychology Department, Denmark
- Aarhus University, Psychology Department, Denmark

The International Federation Reference Centre is also on the board of the European Society of Traumatic Stress Studies (ESTSS).

## Monitoring and evaluation

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The International Federation Reference Centre does not work directly with affected people, but it helps National Societies to do so; the centre also supports them in setting up psychological support workshops, but the responsibility for implementing and monitoring the PSP lies with the societies themselves. The centre's role, therefore, is as an advisor for National Societies on PSP issues. Although this advisory role means that the local society is empowered, it does to some extent prevent the centre from "controlling" the outcome of training of trainers workshops

Any evaluation of the reference centre's efforts to set up training of trainers workshops must include an assessment of the services rendered by National Societies. In all future cooperative efforts with National Societies, clear monitoring and evaluation procedures should be an integral element of the terms of reference for the centre's work.

## The future

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The International Federation Reference Centre aims to establish regional focal points for implementing PSP, which will enable a culturally sensitive exchange of expertise, experience and knowledge. For this decentralization to be effective, however, the centre must not only strengthen its coordinating role concerning national and regional efforts, but also further develop concepts, use of common guidelines and sharing of lessons learned.

The International Federation Reference Centre has also set up a roster of professionals, including staff from a number of National Societies, who are able to work on its behalf. These professionals will also encourage the regionalization of PSP.

## Lessons learned

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- National Societies' awareness of psychological support and mental health has increased considerably, as can be seen from the number of societies actively involved in developing PSP: in 1995, they numbered 17 and in 2001, 60.
- The International Federation Reference Centre should encourage National Societies to include PSP in their development plans and, if necessary, assist them to do so. This is essential as the lack of necessary resources often hinders the effective implementation of PSP.
- A basic principle of psychological support programmes is to develop methods that are ethical and acceptable in different cultures. To ensure that PSP match specific cultural contexts, education and training are, whenever possible, based on local resources and local professionals. The Red Cross and Red Crescent's approach is unique in that it takes into consideration the perspective of many different countries and cultures.
- Psychological support and interventions are often looked upon as a western approach and, therefore, not necessarily relevant for other cultures. The International Federation Reference Centre, however, argues that psychological distress and trauma have both culture-bound and universal dimensions. Although experiencing shock, loss, grief and powerlessness as a response to a traumatic experience is universal, the way an individual reacts to mental distress depends on the person him/herself and on his/her culture. For this reason, methods to implement PSP in a culturally sensitive manner have been developed (see above).
- The PSP cannot be successful if the reference centre has to "force" it on National Societies. They have to be sufficiently motivated to request help in implementing PSP. This often happens after a national disaster, which acts as an "eye-opener" for the National Society.
- The most important of the International Federation Reference Centre's strengths is probably its network and its partnership agreements at both organizational and professional levels. In the long term, an ever-extending network will permit a greater exchange of experience and information about projects between National Societies at both regional and global levels.
- The centre has developed a sound balance between its operational and administrative functions.
- In the case of the reference centre, a National Society took the leadership in developing a programme area, but it remains an International Federation programme. It is necessary in such cases to ensure that other National Societies continue to be included in all aspects of the programme.