

# Psychological support

This module introduces psychological support, shows why it is needed and explains the role of volunteers in helping to relieve emotional suffering by mobilizing the power of humanity and helping people to rely once more on their own resources to rebuild shattered lives.

While the module focuses on the provision of psychological support in larger-scale critical events, the approach is also applicable and adaptable to many other Red Cross - Red Crescent settings.

## Learning objectives

At the end of this module, participants should be able to:

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- Describe the purpose of psychological support
- Describe the role of volunteers in the provision of psychological support
- Outline steps in the evolution of psychological support programmes
- Describe the basic principles involved in the implementation of a psychological support programme in a disaster situation.

## 1.1 What is psychological support?

Disasters, conflicts, wars and health epidemics are numerous and are by their very nature a serious threat to the health and well-being of the people involved. The World Disaster Report 2001<sup>1</sup> states that 256 million people were affected by disasters in 2000. According to the United Nations, there are currently more than forty million refugees, internally displaced persons and other victims of violence, and at the end of 2001 an estimated forty million people globally were infected with HIV/AIDS.

The big disasters make the newspapers, but the less well-publicized, smaller disasters are just as devastating in their effect on the lives and health of the local population.

Critical events, such as disasters, conflicts, wars, accidents and health epidemics occur with social and psychological consequences that often undermine people's ability to carry on with their lives. Characteristic of the problems faced by these people is a feeling of loss, i.e.:

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- Loss of personal relations and material goods
- Loss of opportunity to generate an income
- Loss of social cohesion
- Loss of dignity, trust and safety
- Loss of a positive self image
- Loss of trust in the future.

1- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2001) *World Disaster Report 2001*, IFRC.

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The mission of the Red Cross - Red Crescent has historically been to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity, to try to help people come to terms with the sense of loss, and to rebuild their lives. Psychological support helps to relieve emotional suffering so that beneficiaries are sooner able to rely on their own resources and cope more successfully with the hardships they face on the road to recovery. Psychological support, then, describes any activity that improves a person's ability to function under the extraordinary level of stress observed in the context of a critical event.

Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers are an indispensable part of the organization's mission. As members of the community concerned, they are in a better position to provide support to people affected by tragedy. They cannot, however, be expected to give efficient and effective support without themselves being supported. One of the main ways that the International Federation can provide this support is through training.

This training manual has therefore been developed to assist Red Cross - Red Crescent trainers to equip volunteers to meet the challenge of providing psychological support to these vulnerable people, and to help them contribute to the improvement of their health and well-being.

## 1.2 The role of volunteers

Volunteers form a critical group in the achievement of the Red Cross - Red Crescent mission to respond to all aspects of human suffering. People in a crisis situation generally benefit from a friendly and compassionate helper who is supportive but not intrusive. This psychological support in a Red Cross - Red Crescent setting is most often provided by minimally trained volunteers in community-based programmes. The type of help must be restricted to activities that do not exceed the helpers' level of training. This often means simply being emotionally available and listening to how a distressing event has affected people. Once the situation has been adequately assessed, activities should be aimed at mobilizing and empowering communities to care for themselves.

Volunteer activities include various forms of social support, grief counselling, education about normal and abnormal stress reactions, stress management training, groups for parents of affected children, and other community-oriented interventions. Because it is recognized that individuals are often best served by members of their own communities, psychological support activities directed at improving community functioning are often the most efficient way of supporting the largest number of people. This leaves open the option of more individually tailored interventions for those whose needs are more extreme or unique.

Psychological support is designed to:

Relieve suffering, both emotional as well as physical	
Improve people's short-term functioning	In the immediate aftermath of a crisis, people may have reactions or make decisions with serious long-term implications. Helping people to function well in the short term has a preventive function.
Reduce long-term negative psychological effects	Early psychological support can relieve stress to a substantial extent and decrease the chance that a person will develop a long-term stress reaction. By helping people to develop self-help skills and self-confidence, the process of feeling helpless and hopeless, which otherwise might lead to depression, is interrupted.

In other words, psychological support:

- Provides immediate relief
- Reduces the risk of so-called normal reactions developing into something more severe
- Can help to meet the physical and material needs confronting many disaster survivors.

Those who offer psychological support must basically have good people skills and show concern, willingness and interest in helping those in need.

### Activity 1A: Attributes and attitudes of helpers

*Brainstorming. Ask the group:*

*What do you think the main attributes and attitudes of a volunteer offering psychological support should be? Spend 5 minutes brainstorming and writing down on a flipchart those characteristics which are likely to be required or to be developed.*

*Encourage all participants to contribute and to comment freely on the contributions of others.*

*Purpose of this Activity:*

- To involve participants at an early stage in the process of critical debate and group discussion.

The following are examples of characteristics that may have come up in the discussion, and which are considered to be essential.

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- Listening skills
- Patience
- Caring attitude
- Trustworthiness
- Approachability
- Empathy
- Non-judgemental approach
- Kindness
- Commitment

The training provided in this manual, together with the more local priorities that the trainer, with knowledge of local conditions and culture, can add, will help volunteers and helpers to be more aware of some basic ideas and techniques which will aid them



in their work. Most people have what it takes to be supportive to another person, but recognizing explicitly what the skills used are, and learning how to enhance and apply them more effectively is one of the aims of the training. Once training has taken place, it is important to use and refine the skills and techniques learned. Since psychological support can be valuable in critical events of any size, from a single-family house fire to enormous catastrophes like earthquake, floods, wars and epidemics like HIV/AIDS, most volunteers will find many opportunities to put new ideas and enhanced skills into action.

### 1.3 The evolution of psychological support programmes

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Psychological support, guidance, advice and care have traditionally been carried out by family or community members. In today's world, however, community bonds are changing and in many cases weakening. The breakdown of large, extended family or community networks and the loosening of links between people have meant that, when disaster strikes and help is needed, the traditional support mechanisms are not nearly as efficient as they once were.

Even where these traditional support mechanisms function well, they are likely to break down in the aftermath of disaster or crisis. The Red Cross - Red Crescent involvement in psychological support is an attempt to meet this eventuality.

The need to provide psychological support to victims of disaster was recognized following a number of natural and technological disasters in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Red Cross - Red Crescent was challenged by a group of beneficiaries with different needs from the more traditional ones; they were not hungry or in need of a place to stay, but rather distressed and troubled by the insecurity and losses that destructive events had caused. It was in the aftermath of these disasters that the International Federation realised there was a need to include response mechanisms in emergency relief related to psychological needs.

The first consultation on psychological support was held in Copenhagen in 1991, and two years later the International Federation and the Danish Red Cross established a Reference Centre for Psychological Support. The main purpose of the centre is to provide technical support and to help develop the capacity of the National Societies to provide psychological support to people affected by disaster in order to prevent the development of severe psychological reactions.

Another turning point came with the emergence of new types of conflict and greater exposure than ever of humanitarian workers to large-scale atrocities (e.g. in Somalia, Liberia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda). During these crises millions of people suffered, and that suffering affected humanitarian workers who came back feeling completely exhausted, depressed, lost, isolated, and suffering from nightmares and flashbacks. They often found it difficult to talk about their feelings of helplessness and horror to family, friends and colleagues, who sometimes:

- Could not fully understand what they had been through
- Were not interested
- Were unable to tolerate seeing a friend in such pain.

It became increasingly clear that relief workers are also victims of disasters.

Gradually, psychological support to humanitarian workers has gained wide recognition within the International Federation and among humanitarian workers themselves. It has been understood that relief work is not only extremely stressful and may lead to burnout and vicarious victimization, but may also lead to limited operational capacity at a time when the skills of these workers are most needed.

The International Federation, together with its member National Societies, today represent an important pool of knowledge in the field of psychological support to victims of disaster. Since the early 1990s knowledge of humanitarian support and psychological care has been accumulating. Today, 10 years on, psychological support is increasingly integrated into many first aid, social welfare, disaster preparedness and response operations around the world.

## 1.4 Basic principles in the implementation of a psychological support programme

The organization and provision of psychological support will depend entirely on the critical event for which support is needed. It must be clear that there are no simple solutions. A number of guiding principles have, however, been identified, which should be considered before and during the implementation of a psychological support programme. In addition, evaluation of the support programme after the event should be based on these guiding principles:

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- Community-based approach
- Use of trained volunteers
- Empowerment
- Community participation
- Care with terminology
- Active involvement
- Early intervention
- Viable interventions.

### Community-based approach

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The Red Cross - Red Crescent experiences in implementing psychological support programmes have shown that a community-based approach, i.e. building on local resources, providing training and upgrading local structures and institutions, is crucial to success. This approach allows for trained volunteers to share their knowledge with fellow community members, and because the majority of emotions (e.g. distress and sorrow) do not require professional treatment, these local resources often become instrumental in providing successful relief. By working with groups rather than individuals and focusing on strengthening networks in the community, a much larger number of people can be helped. In addition, involving the community with its knowledge, values and practices makes a culturally appropriate response more likely.<sup>2</sup>

### Trained volunteers

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As already indicated, another basic principle is to base psychological support programmes on voluntary work. The training of volunteers aims at teaching them to share and apply basic psychological skills with victims of crisis, shock and loss. Volunteers are a precious resource, because they are part of the community affected by the disaster and can react immediately in times of crisis and continue providing long-term support to the survivors. They have easy access to, and the

2- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2001) *Psychological support: Best practices from Red Cross and Red Crescent programmes*, IFRC.

confidence of, the disaster survivors. A major benefit of their inside knowledge of the local culture is that they are more able to provide appropriate and adequate assistance to the affected population.<sup>3</sup>

### Empowerment

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There is always a risk in a disaster context of the helper humiliating and making the recipient passive. The motivation to help others can be triggered by compassion, protest against injustice, love, or other equally well-meaning emotions, but it may also be triggered by superiority, arrogance, power and the need for gratitude. Accepting help may start a positive process and solve a crisis. However, it may also emphasize inability and dependency, leading to bitterness or anger about being a victim in the eyes of others. In general, humanitarian organizations should be aware of the fact that quality relief and assistance is based on helping others to regain self-respect and autonomy, in other words on empowerment. It is as important to focus on the abilities and strengths of recipients as on their problems and weaknesses.

Empowerment can be accomplished through various means, and it is certainly affected by the initial approach to those concerned. A high degree of community participation is generally accepted as one way to encourage empowerment of the people.<sup>4</sup>

### Community participation

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Basing projects on ideas developed by the concerned people themselves will promote empowerment and local ownership and help facilitate and consolidate a long-term capacity for problem solving. Through participation people gain an increase in control over their lives, as well as the life of the community. Participation in collective decision-making about their needs, as well as in the development and implementation of strategies, is based on their collective strength to meet those needs. This aspect must be reflected all through the programme cycle. Hence, community participation is instrumental in reintegrating individuals and families within their communities, as well as identifying and restoring natural community networks and coping strategies.

The international community needs to be guided by the people we aim to serve. If this does not happen, passivity and dependence may result.<sup>5</sup>

### Care with terminology

Words can have a powerful effect on situations. The terminology used to describe people needs to be carefully chosen. For example, describing large numbers of the population as traumatized, meaning that they are helpless and will not recover on their own, is inaccurate and counterproductive to healing. Not only could it encourage the development of a passive victim identity, but it also tends to deflect attention from the broader social environment. To be distressed, troubled, angry or preoccupied with a destructive event does not necessarily justify the trauma label in itself.

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The word trauma has a powerful, emotional appeal, but it is a clinical term that calls for specific clinical responses which are impossible to provide on a mass scale and which may have little relevance to the local concepts of suffering and misfortune. When the trauma discourse is largely based on generalizations and assumptions it not only loses sense, but more importantly it may well have the unintended, but devastating effect of giving people a frame of reference which keeps them vulnerable. Wording such as “active survivor” is far more likely to enhance empowerment and to help people feel more able to help themselves.<sup>6</sup>

3- IFRC, *Best practices*

4- IFRC, *Best practices*

5- Dodge G, Dahle P, Robins C, Simonsen L and Stansberry M (2001), *Evaluation report. Red Cross Psychosocial Program Kosovo*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

6- *Evaluation Report, Kosovo*

## Active involvement

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One way to prevent further victimization and to promote empowerment is to focus on competence rather than on symptoms and deficits. Existing resources, coping mechanisms and the resilience of beneficiaries should be built on. The goal for intervention therefore becomes:

- The identification and strengthening of mechanisms that will contribute to better coping
- The active involvement of people in sorting out their problems
- The recognition of people's skills and competence.

It is imperative that humanitarian workers appreciate survivors' efforts to deal with and come to terms with stressful experiences. Self-help actions and strategies adopted by the affected populations themselves are a key to their successful recovery. Crucial in the planning of interventions are questions like:

- What are culturally appropriate ways of helping people in distress?
- To whom do people traditionally turn for support and help?
- How can those people and structures best be supported?

It is, however, recognized that in some situations, original support structures have broken down as a consequence of the disaster, and these will have to be rehabilitated. Finally, the focus on people's positive efforts to deal with and come to terms with their experiences must not lead to the opposite approach where people's concerns are minimized or disregarded.<sup>7</sup>

## Early intervention

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Early and adequate psychological support is a preventive factor when it helps people to cope better with their situations. It enhances the capacity of people to react effectively and to start reorganizing their lives. Neglecting emotional reactions may result in passive victims rather than active survivors and as a result the recovery process will be slower for both the individual and the community.<sup>8</sup>

## Viable interventions

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Disasters create both immediate and long-term psychological needs. The problems that people experience after a disaster may not surface immediately, and the time needed for healing differs from one person to another. Consequently there is a need to make support programmes sustainable by including local resources, training local people, and monitoring the situation. Because of the time element, initial training is not sufficient alone, but needs continuing mentoring and follow-up if it is to remain effective in the long term.<sup>9</sup>

Traditional clinical approaches are still very much in the foreground, but the community-based approach is gaining ground as many more people are being helped to come to terms with disasters in simple and sensitive ways. The Red Cross - Red Crescent experience has shown that the challenges of working in a multicultural environment are best met this way.



7- Evaluation Report, Kosovo

8- IFRC, Best practices

9- IFRC, Best practices

## Activity 1B: The basic principles of psychological support programmes

*Individual work: Give participants a few minutes to prepare, and then ask for volunteers to contribute their own experiences. Ask the group:*

*Using your own experience as a Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteer, and as a member of a community, choose one or more of the basic principles in the implementation of a psychological support programme, and on an individual basis (3 minutes maximum each) give a brief outline of some critical event of which you have knowledge, showing how the basic principle(s) was put into effect.*

*You may select from one or more of the following:*

- Community-based approach
- Use of trained volunteers
- Empowerment
- Community participation
- Care with terminology
- Active involvement
- Early and viable intervention.

*Purpose of this Activity:*

- To reinforce reasons behind the basic principles
- To raise awareness of the broad spectrum of knowledge and experience of the group
- To help participants to share ideas and understand the terminology that each one uses.

## Discussion point

In the whole group, ask participants to discuss some of the interventions that they heard about in the activity, paying particular attention to the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of the approaches made.

## Review and revision: taking action

*Provide handout resource material in the form of thumbnail versions of your overhead projector slides. These will serve as a summary of the session's main points, while acting as triggers for any areas which participants would like to review.*

*Invite participants to ask questions, make comments or give feedback.*

*Give participants the opportunity to follow up the discussion in the way they find most appropriate. For example, ask participants to note some of the major or key issues that have come from the session, and put down some ideas to remind them to focus on basic principles in future work.*

## 1.5 Summary

- Critical events such as disasters occur with social and psychological consequences that may undermine people's ability to carry on with their lives. Feelings of loss may be characteristic of problems faced by these people.
- Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers are an indispensable part of the organization's mission to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity, to try to help people come to terms with the sense of loss, and to rebuild their lives.
- Volunteer activities include many forms of support. Activities directed at improving community functioning are often the most efficient way of supporting the largest number of people. The involvement of volunteers in their own communities brings trust and credibility.
- Psychological support provides immediate relief, reduces the risk of reactions developing into something more serious, and can help to meet the physical and material needs of many disaster survivors. Volunteers require a number of humanitarian characteristics if they are to be able to supply this support.
- Community networks, extended family and other traditional support mechanisms may not be sufficient in the aftermath of disaster or crisis. Red Cross - Red Crescent involvement in psychological support is an attempt to meet this need by supplementing, not replacing other sources.
- The basic principles that provide a framework for implementing psychological support in disasters are:
  - A community-based approach
  - Use of trained volunteers
  - Empowerment
  - Community participation
  - Care with terminology
  - Active involvement
  - Early and viable interventions.







## Psychological support

# Learning objectives

- Describe the purpose of psychological support
- Describe the role of volunteers in the provision of psychological support
- Outline steps in the evolution of psychological support programmes
- Describe the basic principles involved in the implementation of a psychological support programme in a disaster situation





## Psychological support

# Critical Events Characteristic = Loss

- Loss of personal relations and material goods
- Loss of opportunity to generate an income
- Loss of social cohesion
- Loss of dignity, trust and safety
- Loss of a positive self-image
- Loss of trust in the future







## Psychological support

# Psychological Support

- Mobilizes the power of humanity
- Relieves emotional as well as physical suffering
- Improves a person's immediate ability to function under stress
- Reduces long-term negative psychological effects



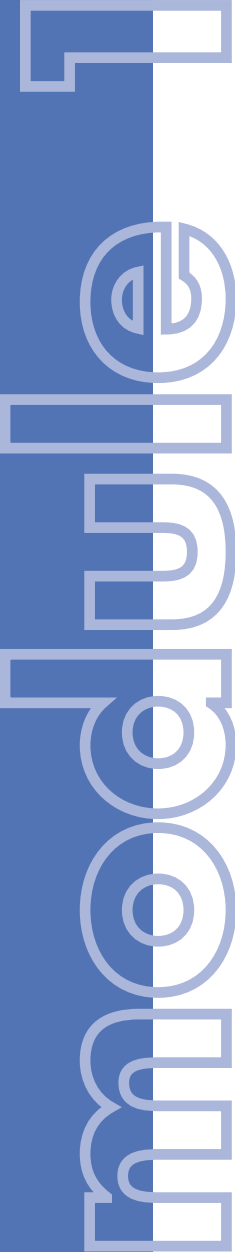




## Psychological support

# Essential skills for those offering psychological support

- Listening skills
- Patience
- Caring attitude
- Trustworthiness
- Approachability
- Empathy
- Non-judgemental approach
- Kindness
- Commitment







## Psychological support

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# Evolution of psychological support programmes

- Traditional support mechanisms in many cases weaker
- Natural and technological disasters in 1980s and 1990s brought recognition of need to provide psychological support to victims
- New types of conflict and large-scale atrocities (e.g. Somalia, Liberia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda) brought new challenge
- Humanitarian workers themselves need psychological support





## Psychological support

# Basic principles in the implementation of a psychological support programme

- Community-based approach
- Use of trained volunteers
- Empowerment
- Community participation
- Care with terminology
- Active involvement
- Early intervention
- Viable interventions





## Psychological support

# Community-based approach

- Builds on local resources, providing training and upgrading local structures and institutions
- Allows for trained volunteers to share their knowledge with fellow community members
- Focus on strengthening groups and networks within the community
- Involvement of the community, with its knowledge, values and practices, enhances the appropriateness of the response







## Psychological support

# Trained volunteers

- Training aims to help them share and apply basic psychological skills with victims of crisis, shock and loss
- Have easy access to, and the confidence of, disaster survivors
- Benefit from cultural insight in provision of assistance







## Psychological support

# Empowerment

- Helping other people carries the risk of humiliating and making the recipient passive
- Quality relief and assistance is based on helping others to gain self-respect and autonomy (empowerment)
- Abilities and strengths of recipients are as important a focus as their problems
- High degree of community participation enhances empowerment





## Psychological support

# Community participation

- Will promote empowerment and local ownership
- Control over their own lives as well as the life of the community
- Mobilization of collective strength to restore natural community networks
- Helps reintegrate individuals and families within their communities







## Psychological support

# Care with terminology

- Care needed in describing people: words can have a powerful effect on situations
- Describing large numbers of the population as traumatized is inaccurate
- “Trauma” is a clinical term requiring specific clinical responses. Its general use counterproductive to healing
- Terminology such as “active survivor” enhances empowerment





## Psychological support

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# Active involvement

## Focus on competence rather than symptoms and deficits

- Identification and strengthening of mechanisms that will contribute to better coping
- Active involvement of people in sorting out their problems
- Recognition of people's skills and competence





## Psychological support

# Early intervention

- Preventive factor when it helps people to cope better with their situations
- Enhances capacity of people to react effectively and start reorganizing their lives
- Neglect of emotional reactions may result in passive victims





## Psychological support

# Viability interventions

- Problems may not surface immediately – disasters create both immediate and long-term psychological needs
- Sustainable programme more likely if local resources in training included
- Training should be followed by mentoring and follow-up





## Psychological support

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### Summary 1/3

- Critical events such as disasters occur with social and psychological consequences that may undermine people's ability to carry on with their lives. Feelings of loss may be characteristic of problems faced by these people.
- Red Cross - Red Crescent volunteers are an indispensable part of the organization's mission to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity, to try to help people come to terms with the sense of loss, and to rebuild their lives.
- Volunteer activities include many forms of support. Activities directed at improving community functioning are often the most efficient way of supporting the largest number of people. The involvement of volunteers in their own communities brings trust and credibility.



## Psychological support

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### Summary 2/3

- Psychological support provides immediate relief, reduces the risk of reactions developing into something more serious, and can help to meet the physical and material needs of many disaster survivors. Volunteers require a number of humanitarian characteristics if they are to be able to supply this support.
- Community networks, extended family and other traditional support mechanisms may not be sufficient in the aftermath of disaster or crisis. Red Cross - Red Crescent involvement in psychological support is an attempt to meet this need by supplementing, not replacing other sources.





## Psychological support

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### Summary 3/3

- The basic principles that provide a framework for implementing psychological support in disasters are:
  - A community-based approach
  - Use of trained volunteers
  - Empowerment
  - Community participation
  - Care with terminology
  - Active involvement
  - Early and viable interventions

