

# Danish Red Cross

## Psychological first aid and psychological support

### Contact information

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### Background/history

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In April 1990, 29 Danish people died in the *Scandinavian Star* ferry-boat accident. This disastrous event made many people realize that psychological support is an indispensable part of disaster preparedness and response and led to the establishment of the Danish Red Cross's psychological support programme.

In parallel with the efforts of the Danish Red Cross, the Danish public system has increased its psychological support and emergency response services.

### Objectives

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- To train volunteers in psychological first aid, so that they can train others and can offer psychological first aid services.
- To make people realize how important it is to care for one another in times of personal crisis.
- To provide simple tools to help victims suffering from loss and grief to retain their ability to cope.

### Brief description of activities

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In the last five or six years, a large number of volunteers have taken part in the Danish Red Cross's basic psychological first aid training course. This enables them to train others and to help people in need of psychological support. A group of psychologists not only trains the trainers, but are also available to support and back up volunteers if they are confronted with a difficult event.

## Major elements of the programme

The first large disaster intervention carried out by Danish Red Cross (DRC) psychological first aid volunteers was at the Roskilde Music Festival 2000.<sup>1</sup> Below is a description of their activities.

Every year, some 80,000 to 90,000 people attend the music festival in Roskilde, Denmark. In 2000, a tragedy happened. Close to the scene, several people fell and the resulting confusion led to the death of nine individuals; many others were injured. The event had a great impact on all those affected: people at the festival, their families and the relief workers.

As a part of the immediate relief operation, 78 DRC volunteers provided for the first time psychological rather than physical first aid. They were deeply affected by the tragedy and many were in great need of debriefing after their intervention. The psychological first aid they provided had also to be monitored and evaluated.

## Monitoring and evaluation

In the wake of the Roskilde festival, it was decided to evaluate the psychological first aid given by relief workers and the support they themselves received from the DRC's psychological network. A questionnaire was sent to all the relief workers involved; 30 of them (38 per cent) replied.

The results of the evaluation are as follows:

- Some 90 per cent of the first-aiders provided psychological first aid during or after the disaster.
- In total, approximately 1,500 people were given psychological first aid during and after the event by the volunteers present. (The figure of 1,500 is extrapolated from the numbers given in the returned questionnaires.)
- In general, volunteers spent 15 minutes on psychological first aid with each victim.
- The first aiders spent approximately one-quarter of their time on duty providing psychological first aid. This fraction is probably higher as a form of psychological first aid is a constituent part of physical first aid.
- The first aiders felt that their knowledge of psychological first aid was good. However, they asked that more courses be organized, especially follow-up training with a practical content.
- Sixty per cent of the first aiders experienced adverse psychological reactions in connection with the tasks they carried out, while 40 per cent had none. The reactions consisted mainly of either increased tension (anger, frustration, irritation, confusion, insomnia and restlessness) or intrusive thoughts and feelings (weeping, sense of guilt, fear, shock, shaking, unpleasant dreams, flashbacks and melancholy).
- It appears that the need to give psychological first aid to a large number of people in a very short time frame added to the pressure on the relief workers and may have been a factor triggering the negative reactions they experienced.
- A total of 67 per cent of the volunteers received some sort of psychological first aid after their involvement in the tragedy. On the whole, they were very satisfied with the support. Those most satisfied were relief workers who received help from the psychologists at the DRC's psychological network.

<sup>1</sup> Based on the evaluation report, *From human being to human being – an evaluation of psychological first aid, provided by the Red Cross first aiders at the Roskilde Music Festival 2000* by Peter Berliner and Mirjam Höfding Refby, and the article, *Psychological first aid as part of disaster response* by Peter Berliner and Mette Sonniks.

## Lessons learned

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- By working with volunteers trained in psychological first aid, the DRC is able to provide psychological support to many people affected by a tragic event. One of the most important aspects of psychological support is to raise the awareness of the public at large of what constitutes normal reactions to abnormal events. DRC relief workers have been able to communicate this widely. Another positive factor of psychological first aid is that, by screening victims in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, those in need of more specialized treatment can rapidly be referred to health professionals working with public crisis-intervention services.
- One important advantage that trained psychological first aid volunteers bring to a disaster situation is that they help victims to understand that they are not alone in their suffering and that their reactions are normal. Although some individuals may need further help, the majority benefit from the reinforced social support which is essential in preventing and handling psychological reactions to disasters.
- The sort of psychological support given by the DRC volunteers to victims, and that they themselves receive from the psychological network, has proved highly efficient. However, the society needs to increase the possibilities for psychological support education and training for first aiders.
- It is very important that, in disaster response situations, volunteers should be able to rapidly contact the support system, i.e., in the case of the DRC, the psychological network. This not only means having a telephone number, but also alternative ways of reaching the support system as, in major disasters, telephone systems often break down.
- After a major disaster, it is important to take advantage of the fact that everyone is motivated and wants to learn more. It is, therefore, an ideal time to implement improvements in education, etc.