

Finnish Red Cross Psychosocial care programme

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Background/history

At the 1993 general assembly of the Finnish Red Cross (FRC), a decision was adopted requesting that the society widen and diversify its psychological support activities to include helping people to cope with crises in their daily lives as well as in disaster situations.

Finland does not suffer from large-scale natural disasters and major accidents have not been common. In the early 1990s, however, a number of potentially serious incidents and car-ferry accidents took place in and around Finland. The sinking of the car ferry *Estonia* in the autumn of 1994 was the factor that finally made people – in Finland as well as in Sweden and Estonia – realize the importance of psychological support in everyday accidents and major disasters.

Three voluntary organizations (the FRC, the Finnish Association for Mental Health and the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare) formed a joint psychological support programme (PSP) which, from 1990 to 1995, developed training programmes, accumulated background knowledge and helped to expand the activities and establish them both as part of FRC's own activities and as a way of cooperating with other organizations and authorities.

From 1992 to 1995, the three organizations ran a project called "Psychological first aid in emergencies and crisis situations". At that time, the FRC had 40 psychologists working throughout Finland, who were divided into two groups: the stand-by group and the reserve. Their tasks have changed considerably over the years. To begin with, in the absence of sufficient preparedness on the part of the authorities, the team also had to respond to everyday emergency situations.

In the early 1990s, the programme produced a self-help brochure for disaster victims, entitled *You have experienced a shocking event...*, which has been translated into nine languages for immigrants and refugees.

Objectives

- To increase respect for human dignity and humanitarian values.
- To improve people's ability to cope with crisis.
- To strengthen the capacity of vulnerable people to manage their daily lives.
- To prevent and alleviate the after-effects of traumatic crises by helping people to cope independently, ensuring that the assistance given to the victims of disasters and traumatic crises is a joint effort of authorities and volunteers, and raising awareness about the importance of and need for psychological support services.

Brief description of activities

- In Finland, psychological support in the aftermath of disasters and emergencies is organized around two complementary structures: the professional crisis organization and the volunteer structure complementing and assisting it.
- A network of local crisis groups, generally linked to public health centres, covers almost the entire country. People from a variety of organizations and professional backgrounds staff the crisis groups.
- The FRC's role has been to increase psychological support skills among volunteers and professional disaster preparedness teams. The society has also supported activities at the local level, including providing resources when necessary.
- In 1993, the FRC and the Finnish Association for Psychologists set up a joint emergency team of psychologists.
- Once or twice a year, the FRC organizes training courses for team members which focus on coordination, leadership, consultation and cooperation with volunteers and the authorities on psychological work in disasters.

Major elements of the programme

The sinking of the *Estonia* ferry in September 1994 was the most important disaster in which the emergency team was involved. Some 900 passengers drowned and 137 survived. The rescue workers recovered about 100 unidentified bodies from the sea. Ten of the passengers were living in Finland, the others came from a number of different countries.

The following is a description of the psychological support provided by volunteers in this particular case:

- The FRC organized accommodation, food and clothing for the survivors who were not hospitalized.
- The society helped embassies to organize travel back to their home countries for the victims.
- The victims suffered particularly from traumatic stress and Red Cross staff and volunteers gave immediate psychological first aid.
- All survivors received information in Finnish, Swedish, Estonian, Russian, English and German.
- An information sheet, *Could this have happened to me?*, was prepared and distributed to the general public describing the possible psychological reactions.
- Information was given to the public through the media on common reactions to disasters, how to cope with them and what kind of services were available.
- Debriefing groups as well as one-to-one sessions were available for those willing to discuss their experiences. In all, 250 debriefing sessions were held by 50 psychologists.

- A telephone help line at the Red Cross headquarters was established to provide psychological support for victims and relatives, general information to all affected and emergency tracing. Information to help identify those who were lost or dead was also received. The help line was in operation 24 hours a day for one and a half weeks. More than 200 calls were received by the 20 psychologists and 35 trained volunteers who ran the service.

The FRC came to the following conclusions about the operation:

- Work was disrupted during the first couple of days by people phoning to offer their help and by media requesting interviews, although the positive attitude to journalists later proved useful.
- The FRC tried at all times to protect the survivors from the media. Despite great pressure, the effort was successful. However, cooperation with the media did continue and a leading newspaper asked for psychological debriefing sessions for their own staff.
- It was difficult at first to arrange psychological debriefing sessions for the crew of boats involved in the rescue operations. The number of crew members attending the sessions varied. Efforts were only successful when instant debriefing procedures were adapted to the working environment and shifts of the crews.
- The area where the efforts were least successful was supporting the relatives of Finnish survivors and missing victims. This was because of difficulties in obtaining information and getting in touch with relatives.

Partnerships and alliances

The FRC cooperates with the church, mental health associations and local crisis organizations run by the health authorities.

The society aims at keeping up with the latest research in psychological support and developing its services in Finland. It is also interested in information about evaluations of practical experiences and activities that have been carried out elsewhere.

Joint operational capacity in major disasters and in everyday accidents will be further developed in cooperation with local social and health authorities. The aim is to improve and expand activities at the local level and to create operational models with the victims' needs in mind. Key cooperation issues are planning and developing preparedness as well as training and exercises.

Monitoring and evaluation

An internal evaluation takes place immediately after each operation. All staff and volunteers who have been involved talk about their experiences and feelings.

In 2000, an evaluation carried out in all FRC districts confirmed that most of the objectives set out in 1995 have been achieved. It considered that the basic structure (number of trainers, basic courses and training of trainers) and the plans for the future extension of the programme are sound.

The future

- To increase the number of psychological support courses.
- To include psychological support aspects in all assistance activities run by the FRC.
- To increase the awareness of, and practical skills in, psychological support in various FRC programmes.
- To collaborate closely with other organizations and other National Societies.

Lessons learned

- The demand for psychological support is ever increasing. As the authorities often lack the knowledge and resources to do the work, the psychologists who are part of the FRC's emergency team are called upon to deal with difficult cases as well as working with volunteers.
- Emphasis is put on increasing the awareness and the capacity of the public to cope with traumatic situations. It is essential that the training courses are well conceived, so that highly qualified trainers and volunteers can inform the general public where assistance is available and help them to give support to their families, friends, colleagues and others.
- The FRC's psychological support volunteers have been successful in operating in crisis situations and accidents. This has led to more demands for support. The society has been asked to organize debriefings and to hold consultations in schools, hospitals and other institutions.
- The "assistance-through-volunteers" system is based upon cooperation with local authorities. The Finnish social and health authorities can directly contact a group of volunteers, asking them to work on a particular project. The FRC has its own activities, but whenever possible it works in close collaboration with the authorities. The problem is having enough trained volunteers. At the present time, there are sufficient volunteers to respond quickly to requests for help. The FRC trains all its volunteers, and is increasing the number of basic psychological support courses. This has the added value of not only preparing highly trained volunteers, but also increasing the awareness and knowledge of the general public as regards psychological support. The greatest strength of FRC's volunteers is that they are flexible and multi-skilled.
- The FRC considers that it has achieved the programme's original goals. It is, however, an ongoing project and constant evaluation is necessary, as is the setting of new objectives. Feedback from training courses and from actual and practice operations is important.
- The more people understand psychological support, the more willing they are to seek help and to accept the help that is given. But a greater understanding of the effects of traumatic events and a willingness to get assistance means that there are more requests for psychological assistance and that ever-more trained volunteers are needed.