

EXPERIENCES AND ATTITUDES OF CRISIS MANAGERS CONCERNING PSYCHO-SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS DURING AND AFTER DISASTERS IN EUROPE

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Context

Worldwide populations are confronted with a growing number of disasters. A major incident is a type of an emergency event or situation, which can arise from natural hazards, human-made disasters or industrial accidents, which threaten or cause serious damage to human welfare, the environment and security. These events may have traumatic effects to people affected (e.g. victims, volunteers, emergency workers). Psycho-social support (= PSS) systems can help them to better cope with the circumstances.

The Project PsyCris

Based on the experiences and attitudes of the crisis managers an overview about the status quo and needs of psycho-social support systems in selected European countries (Austria, Germany, Lithuania, Israel, Luxembourg, Spain) is presented. The presented research results are part of the international multi-disciplinary project PsyCris (PSYcho-social Support in CRISIS Management) that is funded by the European Union with the overall objective to improve psycho-social support in crisis management.

Method

25 crisis managers from different rescue organisations and authorities (e.g. from fire brigade, civil protection, emergency health services, hospitals, ministries, NPOs) were interviewed with regard to the status quo of psycho-social support systems. All interviews were carried out in using a screenplay at the beginning of the interview in context with a guided interview. The interviews were taped and transcribed. Each project partner summarized the interviews.

TERRORIST ATTACK

Description Disaster: Ten explosions occurred aboard four commuter trains. All the affected trains were traveling on the same line and in the same direction between two stations in the capital city Madrid. It was later reported that thirteen improvised explosive devices (IEDs) had been placed on the trains.



Psycho-social support during the disaster:

In the case of the terror bombings in Madrid self-help guides were distributed to the general population, to professionals and to particularly vulnerable groups. Guides were also given to teachers and parents. Mobilisation of professionals and volunteers in working full-time as required and in three shifts. Care for families of unidentified victims, hosted in hotels. Provision of PSS both to individual and institutions (such as hospitals) upon request as well as professional support to those who did not have any sufficient resources. 24 hour provision of assistance and telephone counseling as well as home care by psychologists organized by different institutions. During March psychologists provided PPS to Emergency Services Professionals upon request. Doctors, nurses, first responder personnel and emergency telephone operators were treated.

AIRPLANE - CRASH

Description Disaster: An airplane of the national air company crashed after having received landing permission from the tower at the airport in Luxembourg.



Psycho-social support during the disaster:

Supplying information-hotline.
Identifying the victims (passenger list).
Giving information to concerned families with inquiries (Where will the dead person be transferred? Where is the funeral?)
Organising a visit with the families to give a close inspection of the disaster site, assuring psycho-social support.
Organising accompaniment for 15 German victim families visiting the special morgue and attending a ceremonial service the days after.
Preparing and distributing info-sheets for affected persons in dealing with the traumatic event.
Debriefing of firemen and policemen.

FLOOD

Description Disaster: In 2013 numerous rivers overflowed their banks after long-lasting and heavy rainfall in Europe. A large number of dykes broke, causing flooding in the bordering areas. Overall 25 fatalities were reported. Several ten thousands of people had to leave their homes and were evacuated, only allowed to take a few things with them.



Psycho-social support during the disaster:

Crisis Intervention Teams (KIT) and emergency counselors: Provision of psychological and psycho-social support for the affected population. Expert advisors for psycho-social prevention and aftercare: Provision of advice for crisis management teams and (local) authorities. Immediate-Operation-Team: Installation and operation of care centers for the affected population. Association for stress management after burdening incidents teams: Provision of support for relief personnel. Expert advisors were part of different crisis management units in the affected areas. A special task group supported wherever it was needed. The PSS was done with street work visiting structure (two-men-teams in affected areas with boats or fording capable trucks).

Results - System Level

- More efforts in psycho-social support on the national level and its integration in strategic decisions.
- More awareness from representatives on the top management level of diverse institutions to fulfill standard requirements for psycho-social support.
- Financing concerning human resources for the provision and enhancements of the psycho-social support systems as well as for infrastructure and trainings to guarantee high quality standards in PSS.
- Structural problems have been identified in several countries on the county level. Regional distances of subunits from the headquarters or head offices cause shortcomings in offering standardised psycho-social support structures.
- The bureaucracy-political interferences as well as regulations are seen as beneficial and detaining at the same time. Need for well-prepared structures and processes to manage the collaboration of a large number of people in the case of a mass incident. Problems because of unclear roles, responsibilities and tasks of the involved units and services. Flexible design of structures and processes in order to guarantee adequate responses adapted to the specific disasters. Better regulations for intervention teams in form of common practices.
- Documentation processes during / after the rescue are seen as bureaucracy interferences and cause burden for crisis managers / other staff members.

Results - Leadership Skills and Trainings

- Leadership skills are relevant for crisis managers in order to handle crisis situations effectively and efficiently. The leadership trainings should contain following topics: Task based coordination - Holistic way of thinking and acting - Decision-making - Delegation - Conflict management - Information management - Communication skills - HRM for volunteers - Strategies how to interact with internal stakeholders (e.g. staff members, working with interdisciplinary groups) and external stakeholders (e.g. off-site like relatives, media).
- More training requirements are seen for special occupational groups, who do not perform operations but have decision responsibilities (e.g. head of county, majors).
- Differences are seen in the needed leadership skills if someone operates on-site of the disaster or works in the background with decision-making authority. For example, crisis managers, who work on-site are confronted to decide by oneself compared to the emergency task force, who collaborate and decide on a group level.
- Evacuation of special, critical institutions (e.g. jails, retirement homes).
- Management of short-, mid- and long-term psycho-social support for the people affected and its integration in the crisis management structure.
- Management of walk-in volunteers, witnesses and by-stands including intervention programs.

Results - Psycho-social support - crisis managers

- The own colleagues still seems to be the most important supporters in the case of listening, talking and giving advice.
- In this regard support is also given during the debriefing after a crisis to reflect the processes and interactions.
- An important measure is the provision of facilities to rest and recover during and after operations.
- Additionally, the crisis managers argue the importance to work in a team. For them the team serves as control authority in order to pay attention to each other.
- The offer for crisis manager to visit rehabilitation centres in regular time intervals.
- Preventive measures, for example, leadership trainings or the awareness of the provision of well-equipped workplaces and efficient usage of technologies reduce stress and the demands to take care of psycho-social support.

Discussion

The offer and structure of psycho-social support systems in Europe depends on the experiences with disasters in the past and on the engagement of crisis managers in rescue organisations and authorities. The spectrum of services offered do not only vary between European countries but also in the provinces of the countries. Further differences in the levels of provision are seen in the priority of PSP that is given by representatives of different rescue organizations and authorities.

