

Mental Health Matters



People coming to Syrian Arab Red Crescent distribution sites or community centers are offered psychosocial support by trained volunteers.
Photo: Ibrahim Malla, IFRC.



Addressing mental health and psychosocial consequences of armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies

Imagine that a crisis strikes your community. An earthquake damages your town and leaves you homeless. An armed group terrorizes your neighborhood and you are forced to flee with your family. A deadly virus infects your child and there is no cure available.

No one is immune to the feelings these events might trigger. But with the right support and care most people will be able to cope, resume functioning and recover emotionally. Unfortunately, around the world, 80 percent of people with mental health conditions are without any form of quality, affordable mental health care. Even before the crisis strikes.

Every day the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is confronted with the extensive unmet mental health and psychosocial needs of people around the world. Needs that increase dramatically during armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies. Needs that are often intensified when people are on the move.

While physical wounds may heal and houses are rebuilt with time, emotional wounds can linger long after the crisis is over. And they often remain hidden. People, especially children, carry the impact of traumatic events into their recovery and future. This may lead to an increase in suicide rates, impact livelihood and educational success. It can have a negative influence on people's health, wellbeing and life expectancy.

If we don't address the mental health and psychosocial needs of people affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies, the consequences will have far-reaching and long-term impact. Both for the individual, the community and the social and economic recovery of the entire society.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is scaling up and scaling deeper to meet these needs, but we can't do it alone. We need to act together.



In Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh women from Rakhine State can meet in support groups where they talk about their experiences and learn positive coping strategies amidst adversities. Photo: Olle Hallberg, Swedish Red Cross



The prevalence of mental health conditions is expected to more than double in a humanitarian crisis



In conflict-affected areas more than one in five suffers from mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety



someone dies from suicide.

Experiencing violence, abuse or loss are strongly associated with suicidal behavior

Let's act together

States, humanitarian organisations and other concerned actors need to act. To increase the allocation of resources. To take concrete actions to address the extensive mental health and psychosocial consequences of armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies. Together we must:

- 1. Ensure early and sustained access to mental health and psychosocial support** to respond to acute mental health needs and avoid distress from developing into more severe conditions. Many mental health conditions develop at an early age, and suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29-year olds, so a prevention focus on children and youth is particularly important.
- 2. Increase local and community-based action** to better meet the immense mental health and psychosocial needs and strengthen resilience. Participation in response activities strengthens community engagement and accountability and ensures that support is provided in a context-specific and culturally sensitive manner.
- 3. Strengthen the quality and quantity of the workforce** to secure the fundamental premise and commitment to 'do-no-harm' and address the huge workforce gap. Investments to increase and develop the workforce should be prioritized through more and continuous education, training and supervision of people working with mental health and psychosocial support.
- 4. Ensure comprehensive and integrated support** to guarantee that everyone gets the support they need. This demands that mental health and psychosocial support is integrated in all humanitarian response. Mental health and psychosocial needs vary greatly and must be addressed through a multi-layered approach, from basic psychosocial support through to specialized mental health care.
- 5. Address stigma, exclusion and discrimination** to secure people's access to care and support and protect their safety, health and dignity. People with mental health and psychosocial needs often face stigma and discrimination, which can exclude them from society and prevent them from seeking support. Therefore, we should prevent marginalization and promote inclusion.
- 6. Protect the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of staff and volunteers** who work in demanding environments and are often themselves affected by the emergency. Staff and volunteers should have the required knowledge and skills to cope with stressful situations, take care of themselves and seek support when needed. This is indeed the foundation to ensure quality and sustainability of the services they provide.

In a camp for displaced persons the Red Cross assists children most severely affected by traumatic events caused by conflicts in Central African Republic. Photo: Christophe Da Silva, ICRC.

What the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement does today

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the 191 National Societies – supports individuals, families and communities by providing services ranging from basic psychosocial support through to more specialized mental health care before, during and after an emergency.

The National Societies promote mental health and psychosocial wellbeing within the affected communities through basic psychosocial support activities, such as psychological first aid, self-care awareness and sport and creativity activities. These activities are provided by trained and supervised staff, volunteers and community members and are often part of the National Societies' emergency response services.

The ICRC, IFRC and National Societies work to ensure that people's need for psychological support and specialized mental health care is met through peer support, group work, counselling or psychotherapy, or through referrals to other existing mental health services.

The Movement also works to strengthen health systems through trainings of mental health and psychosocial support professionals.

Enhancing the protection of people's safety, dignity and rights may contribute to addressing the challenges in preventing and meeting mental health and psychosocial needs. It will help the Movement to increase its contribution to prevent and limit exposure to risk and harm.

Mental health and psychosocial needs of people affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies is a main theme of the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in December 2019 where the Movement and the 196 States Parties to the Geneva Conventions are expected to adopt a resolution addressing this urgent humanitarian issue.

For more information visit www.icrc.org, www.ifrc.org or www.pscentre.org

