

## Mental health and psychosocial impacts of flooding

Flooding is the most recurring natural hazard worldwide. Flood events are predicted to increase in both frequency and intensity due to climate change. Urbanization (people moving to cities and towns) compounds the risk. Infrastructures such as buildings, roads and cemented spaces found in urban areas prevent rainfall, and river or coastal floods from infiltrating the soil and thus increase the risk of flooding. Poorly maintained and insufficient sewage systems and dams significantly compound the risk of flooding.

Individuals, families, social networks, and communities can cope and adapt providing they receive appropriate support and services. Most people will recover with the support of family, friends, social networks, and their communities who are often able to find their own solutions to cope with crises. Others will require more intensive community-based mental health and psychosocial support, and a small proportion (including those with pre-existing mental health conditions) will need referral to specialised mental health care and treatment. In the aftermath of disasters mental health and psychosocial needs tend to appear long after the initial threat has passed, so it is important to maintain services and support for as long as monitoring assessments reflect a need.

## Psychosocial reactions and needs after flooding

### Common feelings and reactions of survivors in early recovery

- *Displacement*: can be temporary to an emergency shelter or a permanent relocation.
- *Disorientation*: flood water makes familiar places and infrastructure appear unfamiliar.
- *Alienation*: from home environment, other displacement persons, emergency response.
- *Multiple losses*: e.g., home, memories, photos, sense of place, loved ones, livelihood, toys.

### Information needs of survivors in early recovery

- What type of assistance is available.
- Whom to approach for assistance and how to obtain assistance.
- Understand why each person's assistance package may be different than their neighbours.
- What to do if they are dissatisfied with their assistance package, and where to report a grievance.
- How the aid effort is progressing; how money is being spent; and what problems are being experienced elsewhere.
- What resources lie within families and communities so they can continue to build on them.

### Common feelings and reactions of survivors in the longer term

- Mourning the loss of connection between the survivor and the beloved place.
- Acceptance of loss and striving to achieve comfort.
- Beginning to bond with the new place, new neighbours & friends, and social structures.
- Engaging in rituals from the old place, and rituals from the new place. Both are essential to the process of psychological rebuilding and healing.
- Changes to the physical environment (sense of place) to meet the needs of children, women, adolescents, the elderly, and populations with additional needs.

### Needs of survivors in the longer term

- Accurately identifying personal, social, and cultural factors that encourage natural recovery.
- Participatory appraisal, such as, mapping, brain storming, and prioritization of needs.

- Survivors and communities building on their strengths and solidarities in developing their own capacity and coping.
- Community involvement in planning, participation, and implementation of multiple projects

### **Secondary stressors**

Flooding is a serious stressor, but often secondary stressors are harder to deal with. Secondary stressors include the financial burden of rebuilding one's home, being rehoused, feeling unsure about the future, fearing another flood, the project management of dealing with builders, insurance companies and authorities, not getting the promised or needed support and the negative impact this has on marriages, family relationships and friendships, and the ability to function at work or school. The biggest emotional impact on individuals, families, social networks, and communities is felt after the water has gone and often continues for months and years. People often experience more distress and ill health just as they seem to have adjusted; this is natural. Transitional ceremonies, remembrance events and celebration of rebuilding achievements are important in this phase.

### **Loss of sense of place and community spaces**

Sense of place is the subjective experience that individuals, families, social networks, and communities have of the location they inhabit, including meanings, beliefs, symbols, memories, values, and feelings. Loss of place implies a loss of confidence in the norms, networks, and mutual trust in the civil society that is supposed to protect and facilitate collaborative actions among the citizens and institutions.

Floodwater destroys or damages most of what it touches. Most obviously, flash floods sweep property, infrastructure, and sometimes also people away. Floods soak homes and everything in them such as clothes, photo albums, floors, walls, furniture, toys, gardens, cars, and kitchen utensils. The water is dirty and smells. When floodwater recedes, it leaves silt or mud behind. The water can be mixed with sewage, is unpotable and dangerous. When homes are left wet even for shorter periods of time, they can be infested with moulds, which cause harmful allergies. People affected by flooding very often need to relocate for months while their homes are dried out and refurbished. Floods also damage or destroy common areas such as places of worship, schools, community halls, parks, or other recreational and shopping areas. These are places people normally go to meet, communicate, or seek support.

When individuals, families, social networks, and communities have their homes and common spaces damaged or destroyed by flooding, it causes physical, psychological, and social harm. People grieve a loss of place similar to mourning a death; it is a profound loss. Furthermore, the loss of place means they do not have that base to draw on for much needed coping, rest, and comfort. On the contrary, they must put efforts into establishing a home, re-establishing a livelihood and thinking about handling practical day-to-day tasks that were routine before the flood.

### **Psychosocial recovery after floods**

The most important predictor of whether a person will recover well from a crisis is having a close and stable network of family, friends, and community. But a crisis situation like a flood can put severe strains on these networks. Families may be temporarily separated, communities will be disrupted while the rebuilding is going on, and sometimes people will move away for good. The psychosocial effects of floods are long lasting; if left unattended they can complicate recovery and rebuilding, and cause lasting harm to individuals, families, and communities.

*For more resources about MHPSS after flooding, see: [Key Actions for Psychosocial Support in Flooding: Creating resilience in urban areas](#) and [Psychosocial Support in Flooding: Toolbox](#)*