



Disaster Behavioral Health

Disaster behavioral health is the provision of mental health, substance abuse, and stress management services to disaster survivors and responders.

Behavioral Health Concerns Affecting Survivors and Responders:

Following an emergency event, it is common for individuals and families in and around the affected region to experience distress and anxiety about safety, health, and recovery. Previous exposure to large scale events, such as a severe hurricane or flood, may place residents and responders who experience a new disaster at greater risk for adverse stress reactions. People may display symptoms and reactions such as:

- Emotional symptoms such as irritability or excessive sadness.
- Cognitive dysfunction such as difficulty making decisions or following directions.
- Physical symptoms such as headache, stomach pain, or difficulty breathing.
- Behavioral reactions such as consuming more alcohol or interpersonal conflict.
- Failure to adhere to needed physical or psychiatric medication needs.

Other factors that can influence how people respond to disaster include:

- Residents of disaster affected areas may be displaced, living in temporary emergency shelters, and separated from their usual support systems.
- Circumstances may make it difficult to learn the status of recovery efforts or to find out the condition of friends, family members, and communities.
- The exposure of disaster responders and volunteers to widespread destruction, the injury or death of others, or to hazardous materials may result in distress or a need for support.

The Need for Disaster Behavioral Health Capabilities:

Natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and other emergencies of the last several years, as well as the growing research on the impacts of these events, have highlighted the need for behavioral health capabilities:

- Research shows a link between exposure to trauma and the onset of other health care needs immediately following an emergency event, and often for many years after.
- Studies correlate trauma with later cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, and neurological illness, as well as psychiatric diagnoses such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and substance abuse disorders.
- Costs associated with the treatment of those problems also increase.

Disaster Behavioral Health Response:

Behavioral health professionals trained in disaster response often work in shelters, medical and psychiatric facilities, or may engage in outreach and educational activities in communities to facilitate the resiliency and recovery of survivors and responders by:

- Providing psycho-education and information on physical and environmental hazards.
- Engaging in supportive listening.
- Screening individuals who are at greater risk for longer-term adverse reactions.
- Ensuring referral to appropriate medical, psychological, or tangible services.