

WORKING WITH COMMON REACTIONS TO DISASTER

Chapter 4

INTRODUCTION

Reactions to disasters range from experiencing what can be called normal stress to the less common chronic and severe post traumatic stress sequelae. Also, disaster victims may experience bereavement because of a loss of loved ones, property, or some other attachment. This chapter helps the mental health worker identify the victimized individual's reaction and gives some hints on developing an effective intervention. The signs and symptoms listed are not all-inclusive, but are representative of the types that may be seen in outreach work.

STRESS

Most, if not all, disaster victims will experience stress in reaction to the event and/or as part of the subsequent rebuilding process. The length, type, or severity of the stress response varies among people depending on factors such as:

- perception of the event
- perception of the consequences
- personal resources
- social support
- degree of loss

Some common signs of stress are:

Cognitive

- lower attention span
- poor concentration
- memory problems
- uncertainty
- impulsive decisions

Emotional

- emotional lability
- agitation
- irritability
- feeling overwhelmed
- apprehension

Behavioral

- impulsive outbursts
- change in activity
- muscle tension, spasm or pain
- increased movement
- chronic complaining

The physical cost of stress may be illness. Below are several physical signs of stress which disaster victims should share with a physician:

- tachycardia (rapid heart rate)
- chest pain
- increased illness (e.g. colds)
- increased blood pressure
- chronic fatigue
- digestive problems