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FactSheet

Psychosocial Resources in the Aftermath of Natural and Human Caused Disasters: A Review of the Empirical Literature, with Implications for Intervention

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Findings regarding psychosocial resources are organized by distinguishing between resources that are thr stress (vulnerable resources) and resources that emerge in response to stress (emergent resources). Eme resources must be mobilized to replace or replenish the vulnerable ones. We first reviewed the evidence r the protection afforded by psychological and social resources, then the evidence regarding the potential fo deterioration, then the evidence regarding resource mobilization in the aftermath of disasters.

Protection Afforded by Psychological Resources

Psychological resources such as coping efforts, self-efficacy, mastery, perceived control, self-esteem, hop optimism do protect disaster victims, as indicated by the following empirical results:

- **Ways of coping** influenced symptom outcomes in several studies, but the findings were not alwa consistent across them. Avoidance coping and blame assignment were consistently problematic, bu ways of coping were sometimes helpful and sometimes not.
- **Beliefs about coping** were far more important than ways of coping. What matters, apparently, is individuals actually cope but rather how they perceive their capabilities to cope.
- **Self-efficacy, mastery, perceived control, self-esteem, hope, and optimism** all are related p strongly, and consistently to mental health in both the short-term and long-term.

Protection Afforded by Social Resources

Social embeddedness, received social support, and perceived social support are all critical for disaster vict indicated by the following findings in the empirical research:

- **Social embeddedness**-the size, activeness, and closeness of the survivor's network-is related str consistently to mental health.
- **Received social support** is the actual helping behavior that emerges in response to stress. Althou

usually is related positively to mental health, the findings are not entirely consistent, in part becaus
help received are confounded with need. Received support is important primarily because it protect
replenishes other resources, such as perceived social support.

- **Perceived social support** is the most thoroughly researched social resource. With few exceptions
survivors who subsequently believe that they are cared for by others and that help will be available
fare better psychologically than disaster survivors who believe they are unloved and alone.

Resource Deterioration

The extent to which resources were lost may be the single most important thing to understand about a po
environment, as indicated by the following research:

- **Global indices of resource loss** show that the greater the amount of resource loss, regardless of
specific resources, the greater the psychological distress. Several studies have found such measure
strongest predictors of symptom outcomes.
- **Psychological resources,** such as optimistic biases and perceived control, occasionally have been
decline after disasters.
- **Social resources**, specifically social embeddedness and perceived social support, appear to be esp
vulnerable to the effects of disasters. The reasons are many, including loss of network members thi
death and relocation and community-wide changes in social activities. An important feature of disas
likelihood that potential supporters are victims themselves. As a result, the need for support for all
may surpass its availability, leaving social networks unable to provide necessary support.
- **The Social Support Deterioration Model**, which has been tested across several disasters, indica
declines in social support account for a large share of victims' subsequent declines in mental health
to the social needs of disaster victims could go a long way toward protecting survivors from long-te
psychological consequences.
- **Resource mobilization** can help counteract the forces that engender resource deterioration. It is
critical to understand the processes that influence the receipt or mobilization of postdiaster social s
- **The Social Support Deterioration Deterrence Model**, an extension of the earlier deterioration i
shows that resource deterioration is *not* inevitable. When disaster victims receive too little help rela
their needs, their subsequent perceptions of social support deteriorate. However, when disaster vic
receive help that is adequate relative to their needs, they maintain their expectations of support (a
subsequent mental health).
- **Families and friends** are relied upon more often, and with greater subsequent comfort, than outs
professional sources of support.
- **Emotional, informational, and tangible help** are all important to disaster victims.
- **The rule of relative needs**, which means that the most help should go to those who need it the n
followed appropriately by most communities.
- **The rule of relative advantage** acknowledges that the distribution of postdisaster help is not gov
need alone. Within communities, the amount of received support increases as network size, help-se
comfort, and economic well-being increases. These rules operate at the macro- as well as micro-lev
Postdisaster "altruistic communities" are less likely to develop in a context of low resources than in
of high resources. These communities are also less likely to develop after technological disasters th
natural disasters. As far as we know, support mobilization has not been studied in the aftermath of
violence.
- **Sustaining helping activities may be more difficult than mobilizing them.** In time, attentive
other outsiders leave. Families and social networks become saturated with stories and shared feelir
time, fatigue, irritability, and scarcity of resources increase the potential for interpersonal conflict a
withdrawal. When support provisions are inadequate, inequitable, or too short-lived, the mobilizatic
support gives way to the deterioration of support.

Summary and Conclusions

Although the empirical data on resources is less extensive than the research on the overall impact of disas factors for adverse outcomes, it has grown tremendously in recent years. These data yield the following c and recommendations:

- **Naturally occurring psychosocial resources** provide important protection against adverse symp outcomes. Unfortunately, these same protective resources are themselves vulnerable to the impact disasters and sometimes decline or deteriorate in strength. Fortunately, such deterioration is unlike postdisaster support provisions are adequate, equitably distributed, and sufficiently lasting to meet needs.
- One limitation is that the data supporting this perspective emerged primarily from studies of natura Although some of the natural disasters studied have been quite serious **, it has not been establis naturally occurring resources are powerful enough to overcome the effects of the profou that accompanies mass violence.** It also has not been established that such resources and proce effectively protect survivors from PTSD, as most of the studies predicted levels of nonspecific distre not to say that resources are not important in the context of mass violence, only that they have no studied very much.
- We should educate survivors, and those who come into contact with them, that **avoidance and bl: assignment are rarely effective coping strategies**. Otherwise, however, the specific ways of co matter much less than do people's perceptions of themselves as able to cope and control outcomes more important for disaster workers to reassure survivors that they do, in fact, have what it takes demands faced.
- **A focus on self-efficacy** does not mean that mental-health services are not needed but rather tha services should be delivered in a way that provides resources without threatening them. Some peop more likely to accept help for "problems in living" than to accept help for "mental-health problems." exercising our good intentions to help victims, we must not inadvertently rob them of the very psyc resources they need to persevere over the long term.
- **Naturally occurring social resources are particularly vital for disaster victims**. Professional: outsiders are important sources of assistance when the level of need is high, but they must not and supplant natural helping networks. People should *not* abandon their routine social activities becaus: keep people informed about the relative needs of network members, provide natural forums for sha experiences, and preserve a sense of social embeddedness. It also might be helpful to educate indi about the reasons why significant others may not always be able to provide them with the quality c of interpersonal support they expect.

Implications for Intervention

A number of implications for intervention can be drawn from the above results. Whether directed toward t community, family, or individual, the emphasis for interventions should be on empowermen