

A mental health care model for mass trauma events such as earthquakes, wars, and terrorism

Abstract

Mass trauma events, such as earthquakes, wars, and terrorism, may lead to a serious mental health problem in affected countries. Effective measures against this problem on a national level require treatments that are (a) based on sound theory, (b) empirically validated, (c) brief, and (d) suitable for widespread distribution in the most cost-effective fashion, using self-help manuals and other such media. None of the currently available treatments for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) satisfy all of these criteria. Following the 1999 earthquakes in Turkey, we have developed a single-session behavioral intervention for earthquake survivors by making various theoretical and practical modifications in cognitive-behavioral treatment. Clinical trials showed that this treatment achieves significant improvement in earthquake-related PTSD and depression in over 80% of the cases. In addition, evidence suggests that this treatment, when combined with exposure to simulated earthquake tremors (using an earthquake simulator), increases psychological resilience against earthquakes by enhancing sense of control over tremors. Based on such research findings, this article presents a two-phase mental health care model for earthquake trauma, which can be implemented on a national level. This model proposes (a) implementation of measures designed to increase psychological resilience against future earthquakes during the pre-disaster phase and (b) widespread dissemination of the brief treatments to survivors in the post-disaster phase. Similar models based on the same treatment principles might be useful in other mass trauma events, such as wars and terrorism. Also presented in this article are some recommendations concerning mental health care policies in the aftermath of disasters.