Impact of Natural Disasters on Mental Health

Deborah Wiese
September 8, 2005
Common Reactions to Trauma

- **Immediate**
  - shock, numbness, feeling disconnected from self/life, denial

- **Subsequent**
  - intense/unpredictable emotions
  - heightened arousal
  - cognitive impairment
  - re-experiencing trauma
  - interpersonal problems
  - physical symptoms
Factors in Emotional Health

- quality of help
  - adequate
  - equitable
  - sustained

- perceptions of social support

- personal factors
  - perceptions of ability to cope
  - perceptions of control
  - self-esteem, hope, optimism

- natural support systems (family/friends)

Norris (NCPTSD)
Risk Factors

- extremity of environmental destruction
- increased loss = higher distress
  - loss of family/friends
  - injury or life threat
  - relocation/displacement
  - loss of home/possessions
- exposure to traumas in past
- preexisting medical/psychological illness
- chronic poverty, homelessness, unemployment, discrimination
- recent/subsequent life stressors
  - e.g., single parenting, loss of job
Reactions of Children

- clingingness
- dependence
- refusing to sleep alone
- temper tantrums
- aggressive behavior
- incontinence
- hyperactivity
- separation anxiety

Review of 23 studies of children experiencing disasters (Norris, 2005)
Helping Children Cope

- spend more time with them
- reassure them about safety concerns
- allow them to be more dependent
- allow opportunities for them to talk and ask questions
- provide opportunities for play
- maintain or establish regular routines
- limit television and other visual reminders

Recommendations from APA & NCPTSD
Helpful Websites

- American Psychological Association
  - http://www.apa.org/topics/topicdisasters.html
  - http://www.apahelpcenter.org/

- Natl. Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Department of Veterans Affairs)
  - http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/disasters/
Self-Care

- find support (family, friends, community group)
- maintain routines
- take a break from news
- be gentle with self - acknowledge feelings
- find opportunities to help others
- focus on the present
- establish healthy habits - sleep, eat, exercise
- engage in activities that make you feel better
- avoid major life decisions
Most Common Problems

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Depression
- Non-Specified Stress
- Somatic Concerns
- General Anxiety

review of 225 studies on disaster victims (Norris, 2005)
Percentage of Samples Showing Mental Health Concerns (Norris, 2005)