



# Behavioral Health in Public Health Preparedness

Every year, disasters such as floods, fires, hurricanes and tornadoes wreak havoc that causes injuries, disrupts lives, and costs millions of dollars in damages. However, the damages that may be the least visible—the psychological ones—may be the most costly in the long term. This is why behavioral health has an important role to play in public health preparedness, response, and recovery.

## Why is behavioral health a concern?

The medical impact of a disaster is just the tip of the iceberg. The psychological impact often exceeds the medical one by a factor of 10 or more. For example, following the sarin gas attacks in Tokyo, only 12 people died; however, 5500 people sought medical care, mostly for anxiety rather than exposure to the agent.



## What is the role for behavioral health during a crisis?

The primary goal of behavioral health in the midst of crisis is to foster optimal, healthy, and functional behavior in individuals and groups. During a disaster or terrorist event, using behavioral health principles can help community members to make the best decisions possible. For example, it can help them decide whether to seek medical care, if food is safe to eat, whether to avoid social contact, or to make the choice to evacuate or shelter in place. During a crisis, the primary concern is not identifying mental health disorders or managing feelings—feelings are only of concern to the extent that they influence individual or collective behavior. For example, disruptive or agitated behavior can be contagious in a confined and tense environment.

## What can public health professionals do to increase mental health preparedness for disasters?

1. Begin working with behavioral health practitioners to integrate them into preparedness plans. Build relationships now with the mental health community and involve them in the planning. They can help you to design a plan that addresses your community's mental health needs following a disaster and to create effective risk communication messages.
2. Develop basic mental health intervention skills, known as psychological first aid.

## What is Psychological First Aid?

Because a large-scale emergency may overwhelm existing mental health response resources, psychological first aid (PFA) is an important skill set for public health workers. PFA gives basic psychological care in the short-term after a disaster and aims to restore normal functioning just like medical first aid.

Psychological First Aid has 8 core functions, each with a goal:

1. **Contact and Engagement:** To respond to contact initiated by survivors or to initiate contact in a non-intrusive, compassionate, and helpful way;
2. **Safety and Comfort:** To address immediate and ongoing safety and to provide physical and emotional comfort;
3. **Stabilization:** To calm and orient overwhelmed or disoriented survivors;
4. **Information Gathering on Current Needs and Concerns:** To identify immediate needs and concerns, gather additional information and tailor Psychological First Aid interventions;
5. **Practical Assistance:** To offer practical help to survivors to address their immediate needs and concerns;
6. **Connection with Social Supports:** To help survivors contact supportive persons like family members, friends, and community assistance;
7. **Information on Coping:** To provide information on coping with stress to promote normal functioning;
8. **Refer to next level of care:** To ensure that people who continue to have difficulty following PFA are referred for additional interventions.

For more detailed information on PFA, visit:

[http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/manuals/nc\\_manual\\_psyfirstaid.html](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/manuals/nc_manual_psyfirstaid.html)

### Resources on early mental health intervention in disasters:



National Institutes of Mental Health. (2002). *Mental Health and Mass Violence: Evidence Based Early Psychological Intervention for Victims/Survivors of Mass Violence— A workshop to Reach Consensus on Best Practices.*

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/massviolence.pdf>



### YALE CENTER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH PREPAREDNESS

2 Church Street South, Suite 314

New Haven, CT 06519

Phone: 203-764-9713

E-mail: [cphp@yale.edu](mailto:cphp@yale.edu)

<http://publichealth.yale.edu/ycphp>

<http://blogs.yale.edu/roller/page/prepare>

This publication is funded through CDC Cooperative Agreement #U90/CCU124251-02. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CDC.

**Mission:** As part of a national network of Centers for Public Health Preparedness that are funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Yale Center for Public Health Preparedness, based at the Yale School of Public Health, works to ensure that frontline public health workers are prepared to respond to public health emergencies including natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and disease outbreaks.

*The purpose of this newsletter is to provide preparedness information to public health professionals. If you have suggestions for future newsletter topics or to comment on preparedness issues, please e-mail us at [cphp@yale.edu](mailto:cphp@yale.edu)*

*To subscribe to this newsletter, please send an email to [cphp@yale.edu](mailto:cphp@yale.edu) with “public health” in the subject line.*