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Flooding and mental health: essential information for front-line responders

How can flooding affect mental health?

Flooding can have profound effects on people's mental health and well-being that may continue over extended periods of time.

Distress is a common reaction for people following a flood. However distress is usually temporary; most people are resilient and cope with being flooded despite being distressed by it. Only a minority of people are at risk of going on to develop a mental disorder. If a person's symptoms persist, they should visit their GP who can help to identify further sources of support. Most people's need for support is met by persons close to them.

Good social support can protect against the negative psychosocial impacts of being flooded. While experiencing a flood is the primary cause of stress for people who are affected, it is important to remember that the stress and strain associated with dealing with cleaning up and recovery may also be a problem. This is particularly the case if recovery and rebuilding is managed poorly by responding agencies and private companies. The period after an emergency response has ended and when people must rely on the private sector for continued recovery has been called the 'Recovery Gap.'

Some examples of the stressors that occur during this time are:

- Health related stressors, such as lack of access to healthcare, new or continuing health related stressors or conditions, and lack of access to prescription medications.
- Family and social stressors, such as a breakdown in household activities and separation from friends.
- Stress relating to education and schooling, such as loss of education facilities and loss of socialisation associated with attending school
- Feelings of loss of control and fear of recurrence of another extreme event
- Economic stressors such as problems with compensation, recovery of and rebuilding homes, loss of employment and/or income, and loss of physical possessions and resources.
- Stress arising from exposure to media reporting.

What you can do to support someone who has been affected by floods

Many people experience shock and distress in the early stages of a flood. They require care and support then and subsequently. The psychosocial burden on community, hospital and emergency staff can also be high. Provision of support for staff and volunteers is vitally important during and after a flood.

The most appropriate approach for managing people who have been affected by flooding is based on Psychological First Aid. Psychological First Aid is not an intervention but is a set of principles and actions that can be performed by anyone. It consists of humane, supportive responses for fellow humans who are suffering and need support.

The World Health Organisation's '*Psychological first aid: guide for field workers*' provides guidance on how to conduct Psychological First Aid. http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241548205_eng.pdf The key features are:

- First, assess the situation and ensure that a person's circumstances are safe, and help them to make contact with recovery agencies if needed
- Check that there are no immediate physical health needs, for example those that may require an ambulance or a hospital visit
- Ask about needs and concerns, and identify if any basic needs are not met, such as access to food, water, shelter and medication
- Help people to contact their loved ones, and others who can provide familiar sources of support
- Help to identify practical ways to address people's needs and access to services
- Listen, but do not pressure people to talk about their experiences
- Provide information if you have it, and help people to make plans for next steps.

It is not recommended that people who are affected, and responders, are offered single session, stress debriefing, which is sometimes referred to as counselling. Psychological First Aid is a more appropriate response in the early stages of recovery.

However, a small minority of people are at risk of developing a mental disorder and they may require specialist mental healthcare. A number of studies have noted increases in the incidence of common mental disorders including substance use and misuse, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder following flooding.

The difference between a person experiencing distress and developing a mental disorder depends on a number of factors including the severity and duration of the flood, a person's pre-existing problems, and the overall impact of the flood on each person's life.

What to do next

Flooding can lead to situations in which health, including mental health, can be put at risk, resulting in an increased burden on healthcare services and other agencies in the UK.

Emergency responders:

Emergency responders should be mindful of recovery gaps. They should consider the consequences of flooding on mental health, and work with agencies responsible for managing the environments in which people live to support measures which mitigate the effects of flooding on communities.

Social care services:

Agencies that are responsible for social care should recognise the vital importance of social cohesion of communities and families before disasters occur, and should support its restoration as soon as possible afterwards. Restoring communications and keeping families together are key to reducing suffering and promoting recovery from flooding.

Healthcare services:

All healthcare services and providers should be aware of the distress that flooding may cause for people who are affected. A minority of people who are affected by flooding may develop mental disorders in the medium to longer term following flooding, or may experience exacerbation of pre-existing mental disorders.

For more information visit Public Health Wales Extreme Weather pages via

publichealthwales.org/extreme-weather