



Psychosocial support for tsunami survivors

Amanda Aitken BA PGCE DipCouns
Counsellor, Torbay Social Services, Devon, UK

THE ASIAN TSUNAMI of 2004 was the most devastating natural disaster of modern times. Estimated to have struck with the power of 10,000 atomic bombs and to have hit some places with a wall of water 15 metres high, it has obliterated towns and villages, decimated and displaced entire communities, destroyed livelihoods and changed the map of the world forever. At the time of writing 165,000 people are dead and 145,000 are still missing. For many thousands, life will never be the same again.

Following the disaster, the internet has reflected the world's response. Sadly, some have manipulated this medium by creating fraudulent online donation sites or by sending hoax emails to grieving families. There has also been controversy over whether to display images of the deceased in the hope of identification, or personal belongings only.

Undoubtedly, though, the internet has been a great resource for many, helping to keep anxious families updated and reuniting some. With daily news items, satellite images, the creation of numerous web blogs (online journals), millions of pounds raised through online donation sites, and information posted by governments and relief organisations, it has responded to this disaster with a wealth of resources, including many for those offering psychosocial support. Like all websites, these are constantly being updated so the selection described below may change. Fuller details are on the *Bereavement Care* page at www.cruisebereavementcare.org.uk

Following a disaster of this magnitude, many will experience **post-traumatic stress** or other psychological disorder. A previous *Webwatch* (2003; 23[3]: 38) looked at two of the best resources by the **International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies** at www.istss.org/ and the **National Institute of Mental Health** at www.nimh.nih.gov/

A linked site, the **National Centre For Post Traumatic Studies** at www.ncptsd.org has been updated to include a section on **The Mental Health Consequences of the Tsunami**. 'The tsunami and mental health: what can we expect?' looks at the risk factors,

and a fact sheet considers 'What does **past research** tell us about the potential effects of the 2005 tsunami?'

Of the new resources, the **Sri Lankan Psychological Support Programme's** blog at www.tsunamihelpsrilanka.blogspot.com is one of the best. Although a national site, most resources here would be of use wherever people are working with survivors.

Two papers give **frameworks for intervention** in complex emergencies, while another, 'Mental health in emergencies' published by the World Health Organization (WHO), looks at populations exposed to extreme stressors in **resource-poor countries** in the **acute emergency and reconsolidation** phases. 'What is a psychosocial intervention?' helps us towards a **common understanding**, important if relief projects are to run smoothly.

'Guidelines for **working with separated children**' was written in direct response to the tsunami, but there are other, previously published articles looking at residential and community-based care. Some children have not received adequate information, leading to high levels of anxiety. 'Why did the sea come over the land?' offers a clearly written **explanation of the causes of the tsunami** in English, Tamil and Sinhala.

'What you can do right now to support wellbeing', written by the site organisation in collaboration with others, gives detailed suggestions on **helpful and unhelpful responses** by supporters. Another long article offers **practical suggestions** for those working in **affected areas and refugee camps**. Versions in other languages will soon be available.

The site includes draft guidelines for the **media** on reporting the disaster and a press release by a collective of women's rights groups highlighting serious issues regarding the **safety and wellbeing of women** at this time. Links to other relevant sites and emergency phone numbers are also included.

A wide selection of resources can also be accessed through Ken Pope's website at www.kspope.com/ which offers free access

to articles from a number of psychology journals and good links to other relevant sites. Clicking on Tsunami, Torture and War in the side menu takes you to the section on **Resources for Therapists and Counselors Working with Tsunami Survivors**. Although some articles also appear on the previous website, there are plenty of further resources.

'Interim **health information for people returning** from tsunami-affected areas' is a useful paper by the Australian Government Department for Health and Ageing. '**Lessons to be learned from previous crises**' takes you to the website of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action where there is a notice board and good links to sites with up-to-date information about many of the countries that have been devastated.

'**Mental health assistance to the populations affected by the tsunami in Asia**' leads you into the WHO website. The three-section article has links to many other, more detailed papers. 'Mental health and **psychosocial care for children** affected by natural disasters', also by WHO, is an extremely readable consideration of the effects on children and offers specific guidelines and interventions for working with them. Other items include WHO's 'Mental health assessment in Aceh' (January 2005), articles on the misuse of single-session '**Psychological debriefing**' and '**Preventing suicide**', and '**Guidelines for international training**'. There is also a 92-page document, '**Reorganising mental health services** in areas where all services have been disrupted'.

The **South Asia Earthquake and Tsunamis** link leads to WHO's main webpage on this crisis and another extensive list of resources. Of particular interest are the health issues and dangers that may be encountered by bereaved or displaced Asian women. Under Health Information, click **Gender** to open the main article, leading to many others and links relating to this sensitive subject, including the informative **Gender and Disaster Network** site. ○