


Chapter 10


Psychological Impacts of Natural Disasters: Recent Understandings and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the complex psychological impact of natural disasters on individuals and communities across different contexts and populations. Drawing on interdisciplinary research from clinical psychology, public health, disaster management, and social sciences, the chapter provides an integrative analysis of the psychological sequelae of natural disasters, ranging from immediate stress responses to long-term mental health outcomes. Particular attention is given to vulnerable populations, factors influencing psychological resilience, current intervention frameworks, and cultural variations in psychological responses. The chapter identifies critical gaps in current understanding, highlighting the need for more culturally responsive, trauma-informed approaches to disaster mental health. Finally, it proposes evidence-based recommendations for strengthening psychological

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resilience at individual, community, and systems levels, emphasising the importance of integrating mental health considerations into broader disaster preparedness, response, and recovery frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters represent some of the most devastating disruptions to human life, affecting millions of people annually through earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, tsunamis, and droughts. While the physical destruction from these events is immediately visible and quantifiable, the psychological aftermath often remains hidden yet profoundly impactful, sometimes persisting for decades (Goldmann & Galea, 2014). The World Health Organization estimates that between 30-50% of populations severely affected by disasters may experience some form of negative psychological outcome (WHO, 2019). These impacts extend beyond individual mental health to affect family systems, community cohesion, economic productivity, and long-term societal stability.

The psychological dimension of natural disasters has gained increasing attention in recent decades, particularly following high-profile events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, and the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Research has demonstrated that beyond physical injury and loss of life, natural disasters can profoundly disrupt psychological well-being through multiple pathways: direct trauma exposure, loss of loved ones, destruction of homes and communities, displacement, disruption of social networks, economic insecurity, and breakdown of essential services (Norris et al., 2002). The global increase in frequency and intensity of natural disasters associated with climate change further heightens the urgency of understanding and addressing their psychological impacts.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter uses a narrative review method to critically examine and conceptualise the key inquiries surrounding the psychological dimensions of natural disasters. It will systematically synthesise existing literature on the psychosocial effects of these disasters, focusing on distinct phases of disaster response and long-term recovery. Furthermore, it will identify factors contributing to differential vulnerability and resilience in disaster-induced psychological distress. It will also develop empirically supported strategies to enhance psychological resilience across multiple levels, including individual, community, and institutional frameworks.

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