

Resilience and recovery: Navigating mental health challenges in disaster response

January 2 2024, by Amer Hamad Issa Abukhalaf



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Mental health is a crucial aspect of disaster response and emergency

management, as individuals and communities can experience significant psychological distress and trauma during and after such events. Hazards, whether natural (such as hurricanes, earthquakes, or floods) or man-made (such as industrial accidents or mass shootings), can have [profound effects](#) on the mental well-being of those affected.

My study, recently [published](#) in the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, shows that emergency preparedness plans should find ways to extend [mental health](#) services throughout the short and long-term disaster recovery phase. Unfortunately, the ongoing shortage of mental health professionals, combined with increasingly extreme weather events poses huge challenges to ramping up the support disaster survivors need.

Moreover, my study sheds additional light on the differences between females and males with depression and anxiety. Numerous studies find that females are considerably more susceptible than males to stressful situations. Research as early as the beginning of the 21st century defined the most vulnerable populations. Since then, it has regularly been found that women are nearly twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression.

Some of this is due to hormonal changes, but these do not account totally for greater depression. Other [biological factors](#), inherited traits, and personal circumstances and experiences are associated with a higher risk of emotional issues, including unequal status and power, work overload and sexual harassment.

I also found a [statistically significant difference](#) in depression and anxiety levels based on gender, where males showed lower scores compared to females. Similarly, I found that males had lower odds of developing anxiety by 60% compared to females.

The fact that those surveyed are from varying countries and cultures is

of additional interest. Late statistics estimate 264 million people are affected by depression, which accounts for 10% of the entire non-fatal disease set worldwide. In addition, women and girls suffer considerably more from depression than men and boys. This gender difference represents a significant health discrepancy.

Other key points to consider

Disasters are disruptive to one's state of normalcy, including [daily routines](#), activities of daily living, employment, transportation, housing, and social relations. [Disasters](#) can take a serious toll on the mental health of individuals and their [communities](#) at large. There's no doubt that seeing homes wiped away and city infrastructure in shambles right after a disaster would be devastating.

However, [it's a year to 18 months](#) after a disaster when things really get bad. Disasters don't happen and then conclude; they are termed "disasters" because they have far-ranging and long-standing impacts on people's lives.

Immediate impact and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):

- Shock and trauma: Witnessing or experiencing a disaster can lead to shock and trauma. Individuals may experience feelings of fear, helplessness, and confusion.
- Grief and loss: Disasters often result in the loss of loved ones, homes, and possessions. Grieving these losses is a natural part of the recovery process.
- Occupational stress: Emergency responders often face high levels

of stress, trauma, and exposure to life-threatening situations, leading to an increased risk of mental health issues.

- Long-term effects: Some individuals may develop [PTSD](#), characterized by persistent, intrusive memories, nightmares, and anxiety related to the traumatic event.
- Delayed onset: PTSD symptoms may not manifest immediately; they can surface weeks, months, or even years after the event.

Community-level impact and vulnerable populations:

- Collective trauma: Communities as a whole can experience collective trauma, leading to a shared sense of grief, loss, and vulnerability.
- Social disruption: Disasters can disrupt social networks, community structures, and [support systems](#), contributing to increased stress and mental health challenges.
- Children and adolescents: Younger individuals may be particularly vulnerable to the psychological impact of disasters. They may exhibit symptoms such as nightmares, separation anxiety, and regression.
- Elderly individuals: Older adults may face challenges related to physical health, isolation, and the loss of familiar environments.

Psychosocial support and long-term mental health planning:

- **Stigma:** There may be stigma associated with seeking mental health support, which can prevent individuals from seeking help.
- **Crisis counseling:** Providing immediate and ongoing mental health support is crucial. Crisis counseling services can be essential in the early stages of disaster recovery.
- **Community resilience programs:** Building community resilience through education, training, and mental health awareness can enhance the ability to cope with future disasters. Exploring how communities can enhance their resilience through effective preparedness strategies. This includes education programs, simulation exercises, and community drills to better equip individuals to cope with the psychological impact of disasters.
- **Recovery phases:** Mental health considerations should be integrated into all phases of disaster management, including preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. Highlighting the importance of strong social support networks in fostering resilience. Examining how communities can come together to provide emotional support and assistance during and after a disaster can significantly impact mental health outcomes.
- **Preventive measures:** Proactive mental health planning can help prevent long-term psychological consequences and improve overall community well-being.

Conclusion

The biggest emotional toll of a disaster doesn't usually come in the immediate aftermath—it happens many months later. Unfortunately,

that's often a time when [mental health services](#) can be unavailable or difficult to access, leaving victims with nowhere to turn for support. As a result, communities see worsening rates of depression, anxiety, and suicides.

Addressing mental health in the context of disasters and [emergency management](#) requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that considers the immediate and long-term psychological impact on individuals and communities. Building resilience, providing timely support, and reducing stigma around mental health are crucial elements in promoting recovery and well-being after a disaster.

This story is part of [Science X Dialog](#), where researchers can report findings from their published research articles. [Visit this page](#) for information about ScienceX Dialog and how to participate.

More information: Amer Hamad Issa Abukhalaf et al, COVID-19 outbreak impact on the wellbeing of migrants in U.S. college towns: The case of Gainesville, Florida, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijdr.2023.103973](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2023.103973)

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