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Holistic Approach to Community Health in Post Conflict Situation

The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder has been known since the World War I when it was better known as "Irritable Heart" due to the presence of autonomic cardiac symptoms. It was later known as traumatic neurosis in the era of psychoanalysis - the 1900s. In all these traumatic situations, the appearance of the disorder is roughly correlated with the severity of stressor; the most severe stresses resulted in the appearance of the syndrome in more than 75% of the victims.

PTSD usually develops sometime after the trauma. The delay can be as short as one week or as long as 30 years. Symptoms can fluctuate over time and may be most intense during periods of stress. About 30% of patients recover completely, 40% continue to have mild symptoms, 20% continue to have moderate symptoms and 10% remain unchanged or worse. The major approaches for a clinician for treating PTSD are support, encouragement to discuss the event, education regarding a variety of coping mechanisms (for e.g. relaxation) and psychopharmacological treatment when required.

The day after the earthquake on the 26th of January 2001, doctors of the IMA-branch of Vadodara and the Blood Bank of the Indu Health Research Foundation rushed to the affected area, by providing medical aid (comprising of Orthopaedicians fully equipped with a mobile operation theatre and all the operative instruments and necessary implants along with first aid material and a mobile generator and a total number of 150 blood-sacks.

In the weeks after the initial rescue exercises, it became crystal clear that many survivors were also suffering from mental disturbances and problems, which commonly occur after stressful events like these.

To address these problems it was decided to organize a program. The initial meeting was held immediately and Dr. Vijay Shah along with Dr. Joep Toebosch and Dr. Sandeep Shah visited the affected areas of Kutch. A meeting was then held with the village leaders in a few villages and interactive session was held with the survivors who felt that they were suffering from any kind of problem which required psychological help (such news were sent through news paper advertisement in the local news papers). On the very first session it became more than evident that many survivors were suffering from severe anxiety problems which needed to be addressed professionally and if not taken care of at the earliest, these same anxiety would then result in long term psychiatric morbidity and somatization problems. The village leaders who attended the group sessions also felt the presence of the problem.

Once the need for doing such a program was properly identified, it was decided to go ahead and develop a program which will be beneficial to the survivors in the community to help them handle their post traumatic stress properly and hence have a better outcome at the end physically and mentally

Seen the vast numbers of survivors, it was decided to attract counselors-volunteers, to be trained and supervised by experts to work as grass-root workers for counseling in the community. We were able to identify a sufficient number of volunteers from the faculties of Social Work and

Psychology of MS University of Vadodara and also from various NGO's of Vadodara viz. Innerwheel club, Rotary club, Chetna and The Lions club among others. The said volunteers were selected and after that they were, if they were fit to act as volunteer-counselor in our program, thoroughly trained by Dr. Sandeep Shah and Dr. Joep Toebosch.

Because of the heavy emotional burden, posed on them, we scrutinized them thoroughly, also for their own benefit. Needless to say, all volunteer-counselors were/are fluent in Gujarati, preferably even in the dialects prevalent in the region of Kutch. This proved to be an extra benefit, if not essential, for their acceptance by the survivors.

A Practical manual for Counselors on PTSD was developed and written by two of our staff-members, Dr. Sandeep Shah, Psychiatrist and Dr. Joep Toebosch, Specialist on PTSD-problems from New Delhi. They have selected and trained the first batches in a short span of time.

The manual consists of educational elements covering the following topics in brief:

- causes and effects of PTSD
- how relaxation works
- the benefits of regular exercises
- negative and irrational thinking and their effects on PTSD (R.A.T)
- yoga and progressive relaxation technique methods.

Progress and Methodology:

Till date of this interim-report, the total number of Gujarati-survivors seen by them totals to an amount of app. 2600 survivors. All of them were interviewed and consecutively rated on the prevalence of PTSD. Therefore they used a rating scale, in a modified way derived from Anke Ehlers article on PTSD, as it has appeared in the Oxford Textbook on Psychiatry, Edition 2000 which was "indiginised", translated in Gujarati and is taking into account the particular aspects of f.e. the Indian extended family. Also we used important input from articles from the American Journal of Psychiatry, notably from Davidson and Connor, J.Clin.Psychiatry, 1999; 60 (suppl.18) besides inputs from Indian psychiatrists like Dr. R.K.Baxi. During the first weeks we found out that the percentage of "PTSD-sufferers" was app. to the tune of 63 % Fortunately we can note that this percentage is slowly but certainly on the decrease!

The whole approach of the survivors is a holistic community approach, based upon four kind of "pillars":

A. Our counselors hold meetings with groups of app. 8 up to 12 survivors on a regular base on timings that are convenient to them. During these meetings experiences on the earthquake (EQ) are exchanged as mentioned in the Practical Manual for Counselors on PTSD

B. Every second meeting is devoted to the learning of relaxation techniques, including Yoga-technique and progressive muscular relaxation technique among others

C. Another important "Indian" part of the approach is the focus on spiritual rituals, which are typical for the people living in these areas. Therefore we have organized some so-called "Yagna's with the assistance and guidance of the staff members of the Dept. Of Sanskrit and Astrology of M.S.University in Baroda. These "yagna's" appeared to bring definite kind of spiritual relief to the concerned survivors. These yagna's are organized at the end of a term in every village, when the project is finalized

D. Finally, in order to address their physical complaints, the psychiatrists also provide allopathic medicines and the Homeopathic General Practitioners provide homeopathic medicines for free, if and when required.

The counselors make notes of each and every meeting and are debriefed after their return from the affected area. They get in touch by phone, compulsory, every day with one of our psychiatrists on duty, to inform how they are doing and what problems they have encountered with which participant(s)

Every Sunday one of our 4 psychiatrists is, on a rotational basis, in the area. He will see any participant at the meeting who needs more attention, according to the observations of the counselors. Only they are permitted to prescribe and hand out the mentioned medicines. In all villages concerned there are big posters fixed near the community center, in Gujarati, indicating at what time on a given Sunday the doctor/psychiatrist will visit the village

Some times some of our staff members have participated at the Bi-weekly-meetings organized in Bhuj by originally UNICEF, nowadays organized by the American-Indian Red Cross. These meetings tend to be important, now every nodal structure and/or guidance on mental health issues from the Government of Gujarat is not functioning as properly as needed.

Nowadays at least 4 counselors are permanently working in the area for a longer time. In the first few weeks it was impossible to have the other ones for a longer period of time, partially because some of them were also busy with exams at M.S.University of Vadodara.

From different other NGO's we get requests for more information about our indiginised approach. Wherever possible we intend to share our expertise and experiences.

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