

21. Psychosocial Support: Outline

Fear began to break down the community of the city. Trust broke down. Signs began to surface of not just edginess but anger, not just finger pointing or protecting one's own interest but active selfishness in the face of general calamity ...

The Great Influenza, John M. Barry

During an influenza pandemic, both health care workers and patients/members of the public may experience stress that they cannot manage with their everyday coping skills and resources. Long working hours, disruption in their lives, anxiety and fear over becoming ill, or having a family member who is ill can lead to emotional, behavioural and social problems, and affect people's ability to function. It is normal for people to experience confusion, sadness, irritability, sleep and appetite disturbances and other signs of stress. In some cases, the psychosocial footprint of an influenza pandemic may be larger than the medical consequences.

Psychosocial support during a pandemic is often more practical and psychological. It is about ensuring that people have practical support, such as information, child care, transportation, pet care, and help managing home responsibilities in the midst of heavy work demands.

People's emotional reactions to a pandemic may last days or weeks, but those reactions will usually resolve as people come to understand what has happened and as the pandemic wave subsides.

Most people will recover from the psychological effect of a pandemic on their own, but supportive programs and services can help them regain a sense of stability and well-being.

A small number of people may experience more serious psychological difficulties and require mental health interventions. People

at greatest risk of serious psychosocial problems include those who have a previous history of traumatic events, lose a family member or friend, witness a lot of death, face extreme demands during the pandemic, have to make difficult triage decisions during the pandemic, feel personally at risk, or have pre-existing social or psychological problems.

This chapter is a guide for local planners in implementing psychological support programs for health workers and the public/patients they serve. It is NOT a self-help guide for individuals.

Objectives

- To support health care organizations in planning for the psychosocial needs of their staff.
- To minimize the psychosocial impacts of an influenza pandemic on health care workers, patients and the public.

Principles of Psychosocial Support During a Pandemic

- Do no harm (Psychological First Aid)
- Ensure safety and basic needs
- Focus on resiliency
- Provide timely and accurate information
- Normalize daily life
- Build community capacity and resiliency
- Ensure cultural competence

Psychosocial Services for Health Care Workers

- Communication/Education
- Effective Management Structure
- Workplace Wellness Programs
- Training
- Practical Support
- Counselling

Psychosocial Services for Patients and Public

- The Risk of Mass Panic and How to Manage It
- Reducing the Potential for Discrimination
- Communication/Education
- When to Seek Assistance and Links to Services
- Protocols to help health care providers identify people who are presenting because of fear rather than illness
- Training

Psychosocial Planning Activities

Psychosocial planning activities by pandemic planning phase are currently being developed.

Next Steps

- Work with mental health providers/organizations to develop the full chapter
- Develop web links and references for outreach services, local services, practical supports for vulnerable people (e.g., economically disadvantaged, socially marginalized, psychiatric problems, frail elderly, single parents with young children, people with language/communication needs).