



## **Social Work Skills in Working with Survivors of Earthquake: A Social Work Intervention – Iran**

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The Loss, grief and other problems are events that most of people experience them during their Life. The earthquake is a disaster that makes people experience loss, grief and problems simultaneously. This crisis affects on survivors as much as they face to dangers in their lives. Thus, most of them need to being supported until they can solve their problems, be relaxed and do their daily activities. We know that the profession of social workers is to assist individuals who are seeking help. But there is a Problem, how do they help the clients efficiently? Especially, those clients who have suffered earthquake. Generally, the role of social workers in helping the survivors of earthquake is significant. To this end, the present paper tries to describe the process of social casework and those skills required for social workers to help the survivors. These skills include: situational supporting, hopefulness making, consoling, assuring, concentrating, solutions developing and refer.

### **Introduction**

Natural and man-made disasters seem to be increasing in frequency and intensity. Whether caused by hurricanes, tsunamis, armed conflicts, pollution of the earth, air and water or other forms of environmental degradation including global warming, the effects of these disasters on people's well-being can be enormous and responding to them is usually extremely complicated. People's relatives, friends and others close to them can disappear alongside their livelihoods, homes, hospitals, roads, transport, telecommunications networks and schools. This can lead to an uncontrolled roller-coaster ride of emotions encompassing fear, anger, loss and grief amongst others as people worry about the insecurities and impoverished states into which they have been plunged. But this is not all. Other sources of danger can also come to the fore. For example, the tsunamis that devastated the countries bordering the Indian Ocean in December 2004 spread into countries that were undergoing armed conflicts that had already endangered people and their physical environments, adding further complexities such as unexploded mines that had been moved from their original location to wreak havoc elsewhere. Those involved in salvaging such situations have to be aware of and take into account the possibility of accidentally coming across one of these in their subsequent activities. Additionally, catastrophic events can often lead to people re-assessing their lives, the concepts they use to explain the world and what takes place within it; and use these experiences to initiate new relationships between and amongst diverse peoples at local, regional, national and international levels.

Social workers have an extensive history of being involved in people's responses to disasters. And, they have done so at a number of different levels over time. This paper is aimed at exploring social workers' responses to disaster.

### **Social work functions in earthquake disaster**

Social workers joined the rescue effort as rescue team workers when a devastating earthquake hit Iran (Bam city) on December 26, 2003. In the immediate aftermath, social workers, coming from all cities and counties throughout the world and from the both public and private sectors. The victims are waiting for their family members to be rescued from collapsed buildings, digging out corpses from under debris, conducting funerals for the dead, searching for shelters and transportation between the temporary shelters and the wreckage, collecting and distributing food and supplies to the victims. Social workers further responded with consolation of the injured and families of the dead, restoration of transportation, collection of disaster information, seeking out vulnerable populations, linking victims' needs with resources, empowering other volunteers during the period of emergency (Family Well- beings Association, R.O.C. 1999). For instance, after the earthquake hit at 5:26 a.m., some social workers who worked in local authorities such as in Kerman City began arriving around 11:00 in the morning at the stricken areas. Besides, social workers were representing the government to take charge in delivering the services such as "delivering cash disbursements", "temporary housing for the victims", "mortgage loans for those displaced" and counseling to prevent the victims committing suicide. The functions and service programs of social workers from both public and private sectors fall into two phases. The first phase is rescue and resettlement; and the second is reconstruction. Dodds and Nuehring (1996), Webster (1995) and Banerjee and Gillespie (1994) have identified that social workers are an important part of all phases of the disaster management cycle, such as formulating and/or implementing preparedness plans, response plans, recovery plans and mitigation. Social workers can assist organizations that serve clients in the community to establish preparedness and mitigation plans. They can address the special needs of clients and carry major responsibility for the relief needs of vulnerable groups including individual persons and families living either in the community or in temporary shelters during the response period (Zakour 1996; Cherry and Cherry 1996; Webster 1995; Shahar 1993; Phifer and Norris 1989; Seroka, et al 1986). Furthermore, social workers are an important part of disaster recovery plans, including at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, such as organizing a community's recovery, searching out benefit programs, writing grants, and advocating for government programs, etc( Sundet & Mermelstein 1996; Dodds and Nuehring 1996; Cooke 1993; Dufka 1988). According to the above literature, social work functions in disaster aid can be summarized as follows (Yueh, 2004):

1. Support for individuals and families;
2. Link individual's needs and resources and help the clients to access resources;
3. Prevent severe physical and mental problems;
4. Prevent individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities from breaking down;
5. Intervene to change micro and macro systems to improve clients' well-beings.

Iran lies in a quake zone. The last century, except for the earthquake on December 26, 2003, the nine biggest quakes measured 5.2 to 7.3 on the Richter scale; and they have caused among 450 to 40,000 fatalities in Iran (Goudarzi, 2004). Unfortunately, social work education programs and practice have not created a specialty focus on disaster programming. Doubtlessly, social workers have important roles in all phases of the disaster management phases including the emergency relief and the recovery, preparedness and mitigation plans. The results of this literature would, be important for social workers to know what is the extent of the assistance programs that they have delivered in disaster aid. In addition, this paper would be useful to improve social work education, practices and research on disaster aid in

the East Asian Countries. Usually, social workers work in the front line during the emergency response to the earthquake. They are not only government representatives, accompanying families waiting for the survivors from the debris; but also they provide emotional support for families in the shelters and help the families arrange funeral ceremonies. The majority of both administrators and front line social workers have a social work background. They do what they can and are capable to do. The social workers become substitutes for the government during the emergency relief; and the governments could then carry out their responsibilities based on what the social workers are doing. Social workers were playing the key roles in the earthquake.

Based on the above discussions, social workers need to know how to deal with crisis intervention including information and resources integration, volunteers organization and distribution, material, food and monetary compensation distribution, death and funeral management, needs survey, vulnerable people identification and discovery, housing arrangements, etc. However, the difficulties that social workers have in the procedures include the lack of system integration, leadership uncertainty and their instructions, the ambiguity of policies and rules, chaotic rescue bases, their own uncertain roles, limited concentration of aid services due to mishandling, overlapping of resources, the inflexibility of related legislations.

### **Social case work skills in working with survivors:**

#### *1) Situational supporting*

Usually people lose the supportive systems when occur earthquake. The systems that have being entailed love, confidence and assurance. Therefore, social worker should prepare supportive groups to clients in working with survivors of earthquake. This includes the expansive support activities in communicating. In this way, the interestedness, attention, helping ability, attitude, responsibility and knowledge of social worker inform the feeling of safety to client. In the use of situational supporting skill, the social worker gives the opportunity to client and confirms his/her for describing the disaster. The description of disaster and its stress can prevent PTSD (Lawrence, 1993).

The social workers do group social work for reach to above purpose and in this way; they accumulate the survivors to group. The survivors integrate their experiments and feelings in adjacency of each other. Usually, this skill is used to helping clients for psychiatric empty and prevention of emotional reaction.

#### *2) Hopefulness making*

The hope is a basic antidote and the achievement agent to goals. The hope calm individual and he/she feel that there is lifeline in future (Lawrence, 1993).

Generally, the despair and depression are the normal reaction of disaster and crisis. Therefore, the first stage for making hopefulness is emotional and functional evaluation of client. Then, social worker encourages the client for starting activities and mobilizing his/her abilities. The encouragement of client, minimize his/her disinterestedness feeling, inability and despair. In addition, the conceptual skills and rational discussions should be used for acquainting of client from despair and self-disinterestedness feeling. The social workers should use various methods for reinforcing client and selecting new programs. The urgent refer to psychiatrist or psychologist is necessary when these methods cannot change the disappointment attitudes and thought disorder is perceived.

#### *3) Consoling*

The consoling is ancient and helpful approach to appeasing the bereaved clients. Especially, this skill is favorable for clients who believe to religious duties and afterlife. The social

worker may be use clergy for making hopefulness and appeasing the individuals. Because, this religious communication is one of the best tools that habituate the grief reaction in clients so far as they are appeased, empowered and reactivated.

#### *4) Assuring*

The assuring is the way that social worker assure verbally the client to behaviors affects and his/her feelings (Lawrence, 1993). It is like that we remunerate the client and make him/her hopeful to next activities. The purpose of this skill is the increasing assurance, developing abilities, decreasing anxiety and encouraging acceptable behaviors. The below gists help to social worker who use assuring skill effectively:

1- Approving with client's statements.

2- Predicting conclusions and expressing them to client.

For example, social worker tells to client: "it is arduous for you that adjust to darling's grief, but you can sustain grief and loss well".

3- Objective exemplifying:

It means that the social worker indicates individuals who have had problems similar to client's problems and have solved them, successfully.

#### *5) Concentrating*

In this skill, the social worker asks client that he/she concentrates on his/her strengths and voices or writes on paper them.

Generally, it is plausible that individuals contemplate on their debilities in crisis and journalise them. This attitude accompanies with self-accusation and depression usually. The framing of strengths and abilities list with objective examples can make client to self-concentration and self-analysis. It means that client should concentrates on incidents that have resulted pleasure outcomes for him/her. The using of this skill makes client able to resuming the foregone activities and self-control until he/she can encounters to facts of crisis and status quo.

#### *6) Solutions developing*

One of the people traits is the limitation of their comprehension after earthquake and this, is created by psychological pressures of disaster. This limitation makes individuals that consider the limited solutions to overcoming the status quo. Thus, they feel the internal stress, disability and may be think to suicide for escaping problems.

The social worker tries to concentrating client to variety and rational solutions or proffer to client the possible solutions. In this way, the social worker supports the client at first until decrease his/her anxiety and then help him/her for realistic understanding disaster. Finally, the worker guides client to helpful manner that he/she adjusts to situation and solves his/her problems.

#### *7) Refer*

The referring is the skill that social worker compels the client who is informed from other assistance resource and refer to it (Louis,2000). The refer skill entail the new start point for client. Sometimes, the expert social workers cannot help to client completely too. Naturally, this failure may be made by social worker's unskillfulness, dissociating client and complicated problems. The referring is the current manner for continuing assistance to clients and if it is considered a number of things follow from this, with important implications for social worker:

- 1- Social worker should be aware to services that solve client's problems.
  - 2- The worker primes the client for referring.
  - 3- The social worker consults to individuals or institutions that client is referred to them.
  - 4- The worker allows to client who makes decision about using new services.
- Usually, the social workers work in a team with psychologist, psychiatrist, counselor and other proficient when occur earthquake; Therefore, the clients are referred simply.

### **Conclusion**

During the Taiwan's 1999 Earthquake, almost 60 percent of social workers were involved in the disaster aid; and nearly 70 percent of these were involved in the immediate aftermath during the first week. Disappointingly, most Taiwanese social workers participated in the emergency response with limited training in disaster aid. Disaster aid is not included in the social work curriculum at the college level. This means that society and professional educators in Taiwan have not realized social work roles and functions during disasters (Yueh, 2004). Furthermore, the number of social workers who had been trained was less than the number of social workers who were involved. Social work education programs have not yet created a special focus on disaster programming.

The mentioned study found that social workers have significant roles and functions in both rescue and recovery stages especially in linking the victims' needs and resources. Social workers also have unique disaster mandates to support vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, children, and elderly people; help the agencies and organizations for effective responses; provide therapeutic interventions to survivors; and organize recovery programs that improve the community's ability to address their own unmet needs. Social workers also worked with many professionals and organizations that were active in disaster aid services. Thus, the coordination or case management skills of social work can be applied to disaster aid procedures (Wenger 1978; Gillespie 1991).

The roles and services that social workers provide in disaster are once that they have performed in their practice and for which they have been trained in their social work curriculum. For example, theories and practices that social workers apply in the disasters, such as crisis theory, resources linking, needs assessment, searching for vulnerable people and providing support and post-disaster counseling to people are exactly those that social workers utilize in their intervention skills in their various employment fields. Moreover, social workers under critical and changing phenomena during emergencies will stimulate their learning, creative thinking, innovation, and productive activities during the rescue stage. Individual social workers have to strengthen their knowledge of the impact on the victims and the community responses of the post-disaster period (Shahar 1993).

The affirmation of assigned skills in this paper is on present tens and trying to assessing the psychic pressure factors and them efficacies, in order to the client obtain a nice insight from immediate situation and overcome it.

The using of personal and social resources performs the important role in the problem solving. Social worker uses these resources in variety methods by accomplished assessment. He/she accompanies and readies the client for doing activities. In addition, he/she help to client in order to expressing his/her feelings (Shahar, 1993), thinking better, coercing him/her to operation.

The social worker gives to client the information, recommendations, explanations and assists to him/her for designing the daily plans and activities at crisis (Chen, 2000).

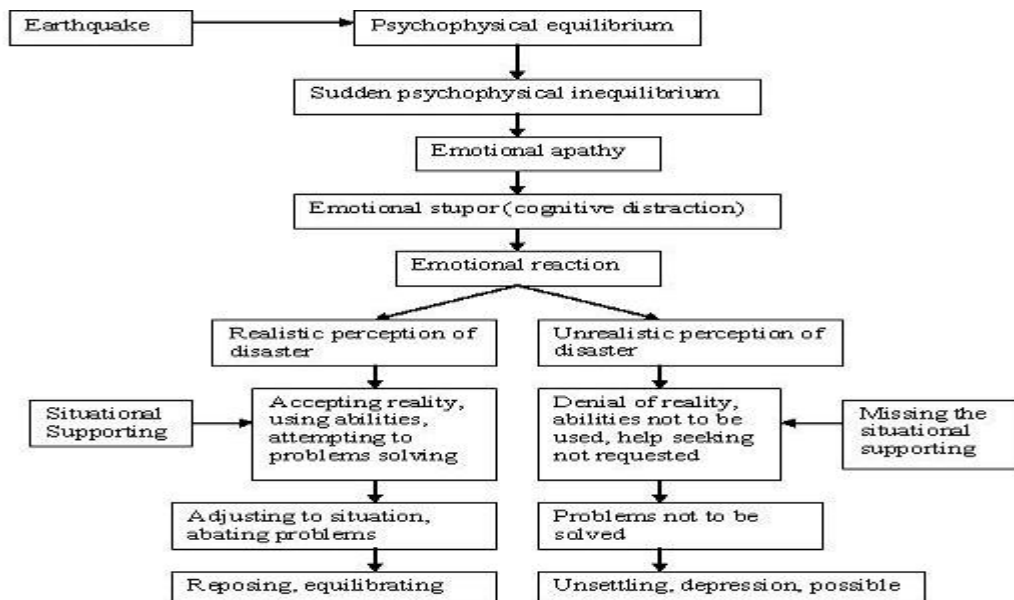
These skills pacify symptoms, decrease discomforts and make the hopefulness, perception, thinking, feeling, adaptation and adjustment for client. Finally, the termination of social work

process in crisis is very important. However, it terminates when the client can find the solution of problems has learnt the new functional modes and performances (Eghlima, 2003).

**Recommendations**

Social workers need to help settle vulnerable people, including daily life arrangement, guidance, grief therapy and counseling, life care, integration non-governmental resources, improving community cohesion, rebuilding families and communities. For the social workers working in governmental settings, their disaster aid services focus on information and resources collection and integration, and how to unify and coordinate the volunteers during the emergency and distribute their tasks into all sorts of aid services. For those social workers from voluntary agencies or students and faculties from academia, they have to contact the local government first; for the purpose is to link with public social workers first and integrate with their aid services. For the social workers from the private agencies, they also need to identify who are the agents of the clients and who are the program executors funded by the government? When conflicts arise between the client’s needs and governmental instructions, how social workers respond and how they balance their professional commitment to ethics and their career responsibilities from the bureaucracies becomes a key issue. The curriculum of related disaster aid services and practices should be presented in social work departments of the universities in the East Asian countries. However, natural disasters such as typhoon, flooding, earthquakes happen frequently and are even getting worse. East Asian's social workers need to face and react to this reality, as future members of a team that will work on disaster relief. It is recommended that instructors have one or two sessions of social work curriculum to discuss disaster response. Including how social work students work with victims and their families, communities, how they apply all sorts of resources for the victims, how they be helpful for the families when their family members are dead, and funeral ceremony procedures. Furthermore, the student’s practicum designs also can emphasize this.

**Figure (1): Earthquake and survivors reactions**



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