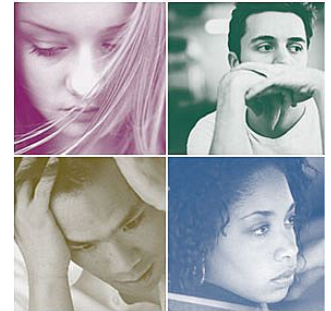




Disaster Preparedness for People with Serious Mental Illness

People with serious mental illness (SMI) may face additional challenges during a disaster. A serious mental illness can be defined as “a functional impairment that substantially interferes with or limits one or more major activities”¹. The additional stress experienced during a disaster can worsen this complex condition. As such, it is vital for public health to reach out to individuals living with mental illness and plan for their needs during a disaster.



What challenges might people living with SMI face during a disaster?

People living with mental illness have the same basic needs and desires as everyone else during a disaster – the need for food, water, shelter, and safety, as well as the desire to see their communities recover– in addition, they may also have needs related to their illness.

It is important to recognize that, just like anyone else, individuals living with a serious mental illness will have a wide range of reactions to a disaster². A person’s mental illness does not prevent them from responding in mentally healthy ways or coping adaptively³. However, in some instances the impact of one’s mental illness or its symptoms may present a special challenge. While individuals’ functional limitations and coping abilities vary widely, research has found that disaster-related challenges commonly faced by people living with mental illness include:

- **Inability to access treatment:** Many people with SMI rely on medication and regular treatment to manage their condition. Disasters disrupt the infrastructure that provides this care; therefore, this presents a challenge to their continued well-being.
- **Increased vulnerability to the negative effects of disasters:** Stressful life events are associated with the relapse of mental illness³. Consequently, the stressors and trauma associated with a disaster may overwhelm the coping abilities of some people living with SMI.
- **Greater difficulty adjusting to life changes:** After a disaster, damage to homes, communities, and community organizations may prevent people from returning to their normal routines right away. Additionally, many homeless people live with SMI and rely on community services for support. People living with a mental illness may find it harder to adapt to temporary or permanent changes to their lifestyle².
- **Poor social support networks:** Inadequate social networks are a predictor of poor adjustment following a disaster. The support networks of people with psychiatric disabilities are more likely to be limited both in terms of stability and size². Therefore, they may not be reliable resources in times of crisis.
- **Inability or reluctance to access disaster relief services:** Fear, stigma or confusion may prevent people living with a mental illness from accessing services. Individuals with SMI may not have the organizational skills needed to navigate a bureaucracy to be able to access aid from services such as FEMA or other agencies^{2, 3}. If their condition is not recognized, people with mental illness may not be adequately treated or given the resources they need to cope with disaster.

How can we support preparedness for people living with mental illness?

Engage people with mental illness in disaster preparedness planning: People living with mental illness are important partners in the planning process and are excellent arbiters of their needs during a disaster. Community members can also be allies in promoting disaster readiness among their social networks, which will help ensure greater buy-in. Be sure to involve them in your planning efforts in addition to consulting with mental health care providers.

Plan for continued access to psychiatric medications and care: Maintaining access to care and a continuous supply of medication is essential for the treatment and well-being of individuals with mental illness following disaster. Many times, if you can maintain uninterrupted access to treatment, individuals will not relapse, even during traumatic events². Work with mental health providers to ensure that during the chaos of a crisis, these essential services are maintained.

Engage in targeted emergency preparedness education: Communicate with people living with SMI about the emergency preparedness, response, and recovery process. This will help to ensure that they know what to expect, what resources are available, and that they feel more comfortable with the process. Strategies to engage this population include:

- Using the media or other entertainment-based medium to educate and reach individuals
- Engagement through treatment providers and networks
- Outreach through community organizations that address mental illness
- Home-based counseling to facilitate access to care
- Support groups held in non-threatening locations

How can we support the needs of people with serious mental illness in disaster shelters?

- Train shelter staff about serious mental illness and how to support individuals living with psychiatric disabilities³.
- Develop mechanisms to screen for suicidal ideation, problem drinking, drug abuse and violence³. Train staff to recognize the limits of their capacity to meet the needs of someone with SMI in the shelter environment and where they can refer them for appropriate treatment.
- Emphasize developing and maintaining relationships with others to promote coping and foster interdependence³.

To learn more on preparedness planning for people with serious mental illness:

Take a look at “Responding to the Needs of People with Serious and Persistent Mental Illness in Times of Major Disaster”, available at: <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SMA96-4077/default.asp>

References:

1 USDHHS. *Serious Mental Illness and Its Co-Occurrence with Substance Use Disorders*, 2002 <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/CoD/Cod.htm>

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