

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT PROGRAMME

CHF 115,000

Programme No. 01.03/98

The Federation Psychological Support Programme (PSP) was created in 1991. Since then, the programme's basic ideas have spread around the world and attracted interest and support both within the Federation and beyond.

The PSP Programme has three priority target groups:

Victims of disasters, their families and friends, plus any others affected by the event.

Relief workers, National Society (NS) volunteers and staff who suffer trauma/effects from working in a disaster operation.

Delegates working on Federation assignments who are exposed to multiple sources of stress and trauma.

The Federation PSP is unique in many ways:

It offers non-material assistance.

The time span of assistance extends beyond the immediate relief phase, since psychological wounds usually take longer to heal than more visible physical injuries.

The programme aims to establish links with rehabilitation and long term development initiatives.

A Reference Centre for psychological support, located in Copenhagen and hosted by the Danish Red Cross, provides technical back-up to National Societies.

Objectives

The ultimate objective of the programme is to alleviate the psychological suffering of the most vulnerable among those affected by disasters or other stressful life events. In pursuing this objective, the programme contributes to the effectiveness of relief operations and accelerates the rehabilitation phase.

A secondary objective is to develop the capacity of National Societies to respond to the psychological needs of disaster victims. PSP raises national-level awareness and prompts information campaigns and training programmes designed to develop a core of volunteer trainers. Since the cultural dimension is critical to the acceptance of the programme and to its success, networking with local professionals is built into programme planning from the start.

Plan of Action

Activities scheduled for 1998 address the needs of all three target groups. Funding is required for the following projects.

PSP for Federation Delegates

The overall objective of this part of the PSP is to recognise the long term consequences of cumulative stress, to identify the level of stress in each delegate and, after a critical incident or trauma, to prevent the occurrence of post traumatic stress disorder. A structured network of support already exists within the Federation, but needs to be strengthened.

Psychological support and counselling has been available for Federation delegates for several years. The Federation currently uses the services of two psychotherapists in Geneva. A steady number of delegates — 15% — return from international emergency assignments suffering from the consequences of cumulative stress. In the past two years standard procedures have been put in place so that delegates going on a first mission or on a difficult mission routinely visit the psychotherapist before and after their mission.

At the same time NSs who recruit and employ delegates for Federation assignments are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of psychological support. In 1997 several more NSs recruited a psychologist, bringing the number of NSs who have an established support programme to eight. There are however many others with no formal support system at all.

In 1998 the aims are :

To encourage each NS with delegates in the field to have a support system in place which will counsel and debrief delegates on their return from mission. When a high degree of cumulative and/or basic stress is recognised the delegate should have access to professional counselling; to have stress management recognised as a clear responsibility of senior leaders and managers (i.e. Heads of Delegation) and to include a session on stress recognition and stress management in all training workshops. (Some of this training can be outsourced: the Danish Red Cross has hosted a course in psychological debriefing techniques for delegates); that the Federation psychotherapists continue to travel to the field and provide preventive, on the spot counselling and training as necessary; to produce a leaflet or resource package on establishing a national level PSP for National Societies.

PSP for Disaster Victims

In the late eighties, a few National Societies pioneered programmes aiming at providing psychological support in case of disasters or accidents within their own communities. Some Societies now have extensive expertise and experience in psychological support and consider it one of their main emergency response tasks. Many others have asked for assistance in developing such programmes. This will require a number of initial assessment missions, followed by training of trainers workshops in NSs.

With the sharp increase in interest in PSP, the Copenhagen Reference Centre can no longer cope with the number of requests for assistance it receives. A workshop to train participants in assessment skills as well as train instructors in conducting training of trainers workshops will

be held in Geneva in June 1998. Its purpose is to create a core of NS resource people able to take an active role in the Programme. NSs sending participants will be expected to cover their costs; financing is needed only for the workshop's running costs.

The "Third Red Cross/Red Crescent Conference on Psychological Support" will take place in October 1998, at a venue to be decided later. (The two previous conferences were held in Copenhagen, in 1991 and 1995.) The Conference will be an opportunity for Red Cross and Red Crescent representatives to exchange experience and information on developing PSP for victims and NS Volunteers. It is anticipated that more than one hundred specialists from NSs around the world will attend. Preparatory work will require extra manpower (one staff on loan, for six months).

PSP Training for NS Volunteers

Since the PSP's objective is to reduce the suffering of vulnerable people in the aftermath of disasters or other life threatening events, Red Cross/Red Crescent volunteers need to be trained to provide better services in such situations. Links with other training programmes — in disaster preparedness, first aid and social welfare — are becoming increasingly clear.

Specifically, volunteers need to be able to identify signs of stress and trauma among disaster victims as well as among themselves, and provide immediate support to prevent further deterioration. Such training is carried out by a core of trained volunteers under the supervision of local professionals. This activity is closely linked with the foregoing as volunteers are frequently affected by the disasters in which they are working. Training programmes will be developed at regional or sub-regional level. At least two, with the necessary follow-up, are planned for 1998.