International Journal of Emergency Mental Health and Human Resilience,Vol.27, No.1, pp 20-21 © 2025 OMICS International ISSN 1522-4821

Suicide prevention in emergencies: A critical public health priority

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ABSTRACT:

Emergencies and crises whether natural disasters, armed conflicts, pandemics, or large-scale accidents profoundly affect the mental health of individuals and communities. Among the most critical mental health concerns during such times is the heightened risk of suicide. The disruption of social support systems, loss of livelihoods, displacement, and exposure to trauma contribute to an increase in suicidal ideation and behavior. Suicide prevention in emergencies requires an integrated, context-sensitive approach involving early identification, psychological first aid, community-based interventions, and strong coordination among healthcare providers, humanitarian actors, and policymakers. This article explores the drivers of suicide risk during emergencies and outlines evidence-based strategies for prevention, emphasizing the importance of resilience, timely intervention, and culturally adapted support services.

KEYWORDS: Suicide prevention, Crisis mental health.

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of emergencies whether due to natural disasters like earthquakes and floods, human-induced crises such as wars and terrorism, or global public health emergencies like pandemics communities often face a multitude of psychological challenges. Among the most devastating outcomes is suicide, which not only represents a personal tragedy but also signifies a systemic failure in providing adequate mental health support (Arensman E, 2020). Emergencies disrupt lives abruptly, stripping individuals of stability, loved ones, security, and hope. These experiences are often accompanied by trauma, grief, and a loss of purpose, all of which can trigger or exacerbate suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Addressing suicide prevention in such high-pressure, resource-constrained environments demands urgent, organized, and empathetic interventions rooted in both public health and humanitarian (Bertolote JM, 2004).

Suicidal behavior is rarely caused by a single factor. In emergency settings, multiple layers of vulnerability converge. These may include the loss of family members, homes, or livelihoods; exposure to violence or displacement; and the breakdown of social and protective networks. Such conditions often aggravate pre-existing mental health disorders like depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders (Foster T, 2003). In addition, the stigma associated with seeking mental health support, especially in low-resource or culturally conservative settings, can prevent individuals from accessing the care they need. Mental health services are often deprioritized in emergency responses due to logistical, funding, or training limitations, further increasing the risk of suicide (Gould MS, 2001).

The first step in suicide prevention during emergencies is early identification and risk assessment. Health and humanitarian workers must be trained to recognize warning signs of suicide, including expressions of hopelessness, withdrawal, and self-harm behavior. Integrating mental health screening into emergency medical responses and primary care services can help identify individuals at risk. Psychological First Aid (PFA), a frontline intervention designed to provide immediate emotional support and practical assistance, has proven to be a valuable tool in emergency contexts (Largen MM,2018). PFA does not require formal psychological training and can be delivered by trained community members, health workers, or volunteers, making it scalable in diverse.

Community-based approaches also play a pivotal role in suicide prevention. In many emergencies, formal mental health infrastructure is either lacking or severely disrupted. Leveraging community networks including religious leaders, teachers, local organizations, and peer support groups can help restore a sense of belonging and provide informal emotional support. Restoring community cohesion and facilitating safe spaces for dialogue are essential in

Received: 01-Jan-2025, Manuscript No: ijemhhr-25-165117;

Editor assigned: 02-Jan-2025, Pre QC No. ijemhhr-25-165117 (PQ);

Reviewed: 15-Jan-2025, QC No. ijemhhr-25-165117;

Revised: 20-Jan-2025, Manuscript No. ijemhhr-25-165117(R);

Published: 27-Jan-2025, DOI: 10.4172/1522-4821.1000683

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rebuilding trust and promoting resilience. Engaging with communities to design culturally appropriate mental health interventions enhances their effectiveness and acceptance (Mann JJ,2005).

Technology has also emerged as a useful tool in suicide prevention during emergencies. Telepsychiatry, mobile helplines, and mental health apps can provide accessible support in remote or conflict-affected regions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, such digital tools played a crucial role in maintaining continuity of care when face-to-face services were suspended. However, technology should be used to complement, not replace, human-centered care. Ensuring privacy, security, and cultural relevance of digital mental health tools is critical (Motto JA, 2001).

Government and institutional support are essential in creating systemic change. National emergency preparedness plans must include mental health and suicide prevention as core components. Allocating sufficient resources, training personnel, and embedding mental health within all phases of emergency management preparedness, response, recovery ensures a more resilient health system. International agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) have published guidelines for integrating mental health into humanitarian response, and their implementation should be prioritized (Novick LF, 2003).

The role of media and communication during emergencies also deserves careful consideration. Media coverage of suicide, if not handled sensitively, can lead to harmful copycat behavior known as the "Werther effect." Responsible reporting that avoids sensationalism, emphasizes stories of hope and recovery, and includes information on where to seek help, can reduce stigma and encourage individuals to access support (Sisask M,2012).

Children, adolescents, and frontline responders are especially vulnerable groups. Young people may lack the coping skills to deal with loss, disruption of education, and exposure to distressing events. Frontline workers, including medical staff and rescue teams, face extreme workloads and exposure to traumatic scenes, increasing their own risk of burnout and suicidal ideation. Tailored interventions for these populations, including mental health debriefing, peer support programs, and access to professional counseling, are necessary leveraging both traditional and technological solutions, the risk of suicide can be significantly mitigated. It is vital that mental health be seen not as a secondary concern but as a foundational component of emergency preparedness and response. A proactive, inclusive, and humane approach can save lives, foster resilience, and promote recovery (Wu KC,2012).

CONCLUSION

Suicide prevention in emergencies is a pressing public health priority that requires a multi-sectoral and compassionate response. Emergencies expose individuals and communities to extraordinary stressors, yet they also provide an opportunity to build more resilient mental health systems. By integrating suicide prevention strategies into emergency response plans, training community members, ensuring access to culturally appropriate care.

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