The Effectiveness of Psychosocial Interventions for Survivors of Natural Disasters: A Systematic Review

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Abstract : Background: Natural disasters are traumatic global events that are becoming increasing more common, with significant psychosocial impact on survivors. This impact results not only in psychosocial distress but, for many, can lead to psychosocial disorders and chronic psychopathology. While there are currently available interventions that seek to prevent and treat these psychosocial sequelae, their effectiveness is uncertain. The evidence-base is emerging with more primary studies evaluating the effectiveness of various psychosocial interventions for survivors of natural disasters, which remains to be synthesized. Aim of Review: To identify, critically appraise and synthesize the current evidence-base on the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions in preventing or treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and/or Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) in adults and children who are survivors of natural disasters. Methods: A protocol was developed as a guide to carry out this review. A systematic search was conducted in eight international electronic databases, three grey literature databases, one dissertation and thesis repository, websites of six humanitarian and non-governmental organizations renowned for their work on natural disasters, as well as bibliographic and citation searching for eligible articles. Papers meeting the specific inclusion criteria underwent quality assessment using the Downs and Black checklist. Data were extracted from the included papers and analysed by way of narrative synthesis. Results: Database and website searching returned 3777 papers where 31 met the criteria for inclusion. Additional 2 papers were obtained through bibliographic and citation searching. Methodological quality of most papers was fair. Twenty-five studies evaluated psychological interventions, five, social interventions whereas three studies evaluated 'mixed' psychological and social interventions. All studies, irrespective of methodological quality, reported post-intervention reductions in symptom scores for PTSD, depression and/or anxiety and where assessed, reduced diagnosis of PTSD and MDD, and produced improvements in self-efficacy and quality of life. Statistically significant results were seen in 27 studies. However, three studies demonstrated that the evaluated interventions may not have been very beneficial. Conclusions: The overall positive results suggest that any psychosocial interventions are favourable and should be delivered to all natural disaster survivors, irrespective of age, country, and phase of disaster. Yet, heterogeneity and methodological shortcomings of the current evidence-base makes it difficult to draw definite conclusions needed to formulate categorical guidance or frameworks. Further, rigorously conducted research is needed in this area, although the feasibility of such, given the context and nature of the problem, is also recognized.

Keywords : psychosocial interventions, natural disasters, survivors, effectiveness