

RESPONSE, RECOVERY AND WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE DEVASTATING EARTHQUAKES IN SYRIA AND TURKEY

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Here in Southern California, we live with the constant threat of earthquakes. The same is true for many other parts of the world, developed and developing. However, while we experience very few deaths and limited structural damage here in the USA due to early warning systems, retrofitting of structures and typically minor earthquakes, we see very different outcomes in other places in the world. A series of earthquakes struck Syria and Turkey in February. The first was a 7.8 magnitude and was classified as an “extreme” earthquake of maximum intensity. Nine hours later, a 7.7 earthquake occurred in a region NNE of the first quake. Then another 6.4 temblor struck the same area, compounding the extensive damage and huge death toll. Consider the fact that most earthquakes in northern CA are of a 4 magnitude, and it is an earthquake of 6.0 magnitude that causes appreciable damage to life and infrastructure; imagine the toll that a 7 or more-magnitude quake can have on a developing area of the world.

The numbers in Turkey and Syria are difficult to grasp: more than 50,000 people have died and 164,000 structures have been destroyed. At the time of the quakes, there was a flurry of response dedicated to rescuing survivors and some of those miracle stories made the news. That initial “rescue” phase has ended, and the region has entered a recovery and rebuilding phase which is typical of the nature of disaster response work. Many disaster work groups and international organizations have braved these efforts, including the White Helmets, Doctors Without Borders and Project Hope. More than 9,000 volunteers have been working to assess the needs of the survivors, providing temporary housing, medical care, and sanitation facilities. Neighboring countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia have delivered aid as well. Sadly, it took a U.N. delegation two weeks to arrive at the disaster site. Currently, thousands of Syrians and Turkish peoples are living in tents and cars, fearful of another earthquake (AP News, Red Cross). Roughly a million Turks are homeless and live each day in search of gasoline, food, fresh water, heat, bathrooms, and showers. People continue to search through the rubble for their belongings, trying to piece together their former lives. Medically speaking, the need is outpacing the services and resources available, including insufficient staffing and medications in healthcare facilities (NPR). The fact that this disaster occurred in the winter with temperatures in the 20s at night is an additional hardship for the survivors. And more aftershocks are expected as the earth adjusts itself.

From a psychological perspective, these survivors are experiencing “complex trauma” as they have been subjected to multiple traumatic events within a short period without time and intervention to aid in emotional recovery. Project Hope staff members have been delivering emotional first aid to the survivors, noting that children suffer some of the most extreme psychological damage in these cases, evidenced by disruptions to their ADLs and attachment patterns (physically clinging to their parents or isolating). Emotional first aid, according to CERT/FEMA, entails approaching disaster victims in a gentle but matter of fact way, assessing physical injuries, asking the victims what happened to them specifically, listening to their stories, providing practical info, ensuring that safety needs are met such as shelter, food, and medical help, and connecting people with support systems (NPR). This intervention is just the beginning of a long, arduous, complicated recovery process for those affected.

We read about these devastating effects on the populace in the region affected and ask how we can help. For starters, we can educate ourselves about earthquake and other disaster preparedness strategies and spread the word to our loved ones, colleagues, and patients/clients if these concerns arise in the course of psychotherapy. A critically important fact is that natural disasters cause much more damage to life and property than manmade disasters. We look to the events of 911, the war in Ukraine, and terrorist bombings versus effects of hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods in recent years to illustrate the latter point. However, according to FEMA, 60% of Americans are not adequately prepared for a natural or other type of disaster. Many more Americans own firearms than have go-bags packed and ready in case of a sudden evacuation order. There are multiple reasons for this lack of readiness, including limited dissemination of information about the topic, especially when disasters are not occurring, and the general public’s busy-ness with daily activities of life as well as the tendency of people to inadequately assess the actual risk of disasters happening and affecting them. It behooves us as mental health professionals to educate others about disaster preparedness at every opportunity; it should be considered an aspect of self-care.

Other ways to get involved are to train with FEMA or the Red Cross or to join the SDPA Disaster Psychology Committee to learn about the specifics and inner workings of disaster response and recovery. We also can obtain training in acute trauma response and offer our services to organizations such as Give An Hour which provides free consultations to trauma victims and military personnel/veterans. We can reach out to our congressional representatives to encourage them to pass legislation that fosters widespread preparedness and protects us from all kinds of disasters, including regulation of our train systems and additional fortification of our public buildings. It’s

all about preparation and mitigation of damage and destruction when a disaster strikes. Risk will always be there. It's how we ready ourselves and respond that matters.

Below are resources for helping the victims of the Turkey/Syria earthquakes.

<https://www.rescue.org>

https://donate.unhcr.org/int/en/general#_ga=2.12210813.835577356.1675788767-1752007173.1675788767

<https://www.unicef.org/turkiye/en>