

PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID FOR RESCUERS AND VOLUNTEERS: A CASE STUDY OF 2023 TÜRKİYE EARTHQUAKE

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Abstract: Management processes during and after natural disasters, among other things, depend on the processes that take place in the phase before natural disasters occur. Training and preparation programs for rescuers and volunteers in the field of psychosocial activities are necessary, because trained and prepared personnel perform their tasks better and more efficiently. The aim of this paper is to analyze the preparedness of rescuers and volunteers who were engaged in the earthquake rescue mission in the Republic of Türkiye in February 2023 in providing psychological first aid. The existence of psychological first aid provided to rescuers and volunteers as a type of psychosocial activity carried out in the circumstances of natural disasters in the training of organizations that engaged them in a rescue/humanitarian mission in the Republic of Türkiye was analyzed.

Keywords: Rescuers, Volunteers, Psychological first aid, Earthquake, Türkiye

1. INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the 2023 EM-DAT report (CRED, 2024), last year recorded a total of 399 disasters related to natural hazards. These events resulted in 86.473 fatalities and affected more than 93 million people. The economic losses were almost US\$ 203 billion. Three events in 2023, the earthquake in Türkiye and the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as the Indonesian Drought, were the most catastrophic events of the year.

In February 2023, the Republic of Türkiye was hit by a series of devastating earthquakes in the districts of Kahramanmaraş and Hatay. On February 6, 2023, two large earthquakes in Kahramanmaraş district, with epicenters in Pazarcık and Elbistan, triggered a series of other earthquakes (SBB, 2023). The next in a series of devastating earthquakes was repeated on

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February 20, 2023, in Hatay district, with the epicenter in Yayladağı (SBB, 2023). According to a report by the Turkish Directorate of Strategy and Budget (SBB, 2023), significant material losses were suffered in 11 districts located on and around the North Anatolian fault line. More than 47.000 people died in the earthquakes, and around 280.000 buildings collapsed or suffered severe damage (SBB, 2023).

According to the information available to the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina (МБ БиХ, 2023), 22 members of the rescue team of the Republican Administration of Civil Protection of the Republic of Srpska (RACP RS), 42 members of the rescue team of the Federal Administration of Civil Protection of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FACP FBiH), 10 members of the rescue team of the Department of Public Security of Brcko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina (DPS DB), and 167 members of the Mountain Rescue Services (MRS) from the entire Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the rescue assistance in the Republic of Türkiye. Based on data from the Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina (МО БиХ, 2023), 10 members of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AF BiH) were engaged in a humanitarian mission to minimize the consequences of the earthquake in the Republic of Türkiye.

The aim of this research is to analyze the preparedness of rescuers and volunteers, who were engaged in the earthquake rescue mission in the Republic of Türkiye in February 2023 in providing psychological first aid. The results of the survey can be used when creating a strategy for training programs for rescuers and volunteers and contribute to the organized improvement of their psychological benefits.

This paper is structured and consists of five parts. At the beginning of the work, there is an introduction. In the second part, materials and methods are presented. The third part contains the findings of research conducted in the period March – June 2023. The fourth part refers to the discussion of the research results, while the conclusion is given at the end.

2. LITERARY REVIEW

The increased number of natural disasters in their most diverse forms: earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, fires, avalanches, landslides, epidemics - have resulted in the loss of human lives and the destruction of infrastructure. Author Shoygu (Шойгу, 2010) believes that this was a vital reason for the emergence of an independent field of psychological practice - emergency psychological aid. The unique working conditions of psychologists in emergency situations require a certain transformation of professional principles and ethical standards (Малкина-Пых, 2005; Шойгу, 2010). Psychological support for emergency rescue and other emergency tasks includes a set of measures to stabilize the socio-psychological situation in the emergency zone, provide immediate psychological aid to victims, and prevent the occurrence of negative psychological consequences among victims and specialists of the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations (Шойгу, 2010, 2012).

The results of critical scientific research studies and scientific articles (Forbes et al., 2011; Fox et al., 2012; North & Pfefferbaum, 2013; Dieltjens et al., 2014; Mc Cabe et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2021) did not influence the spread of psychological first aid as a leading recommendation in psychosocial support activities in crisis situations. Psychological first aid in its various forms has quickly become a universally accepted early intervention for populations affected by natural disasters and trauma (Shultz & Forbes, 2013). International organizations, governmental and non-governmental, in their manuals, action plans, and road maps prefer psychological first aid as an initial activity aimed at psychological stabilization of individuals and populations affected by natural disasters (Copenhagen Declaration, 2022).

Psychological first aid is not a professionalized activity and does not take place through the health system; it takes place in the affected community by non-medical staff and volunteers (Кордић, 2018). Unlike the previous one, emergency psychological help is the professional activity of psychologists and represents a unique independent field of psychological practice. (Шапанов et al., 2023). Taking into account that psychologists in the Russian Federation prefer emergency psychological help, the fact is that the first psychological aid is widely represented. During the floods of 2014, the Team for the Coordination of Psychosocial Assistance and Support in the Republic of Srpska used as a reference the guidelines of the European Network for Traumatic Stress - TENTS (Марчета, 2021). Since 2017, the Red Cross of Serbia has been developing guides based on the provision of psychological first aid, and the guide for field workers has been present in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2020 (World Vision Bosna i Hercegovina, 2020). Of course, which model of providing psychological help will be adopted and implemented depends on decision makers, as well as educational and research institutions and their recommendations.

In recent years, European Union countries have sought to harmonize and standardize their responses to disasters. As a result, the TENTS guidelines emerged, representing an operationalized model of caring for people during all phases of assistance, from first aid (the provision of psychological first aid) to long-term care (disaster recovery). A TENT has developed a model of care that is available to everyone in the form of brochures, instructions, and various e-learning materials. Joint planning and coordination between services is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of the psychosocial intervention plan. In practice, specialized services of psychosocial support and psychological first aid are often provided by different organizations operating in the rescue phase or providing medium and long-term care. The TENTS guidelines therefore recommend the establishment of a multi-organizational coordination network, made up of experts from different professions, as a preparation for crisis situations (ESTSS, 2011a, 2011b).

3. METODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper presents part of the findings of a larger research project that was carried out in the period from March to June 2023 with the aim of determining the impact of stressful factors on the psychological stability of rescuers and volunteers, as well as the existence, need, and importance of psychosocial assistance provided to rescuers and volunteers (psychological first aid) in the circumstances of natural disasters. In order to test the hypotheses, data were collected on a sample of rescuers and volunteers in the period March – June 2023 using a questionnaire.

In order to achieve the goal of this work, research was conducted with members of the protection and rescue forces of the Republican Administration of Civil Protection of the Republic of Srpska, volunteers of the Mountain Rescue Service of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and members of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina who were engaged in a rescue mission to minimize the consequences of the earthquake in the Republic Türkiye in February 2023.

The survey instrument was a survey questionnaire with combined questions. The survey questionnaire for this research was created based on questionnaires that have been used in previous research (Марчета, 2021). Survey questions were formed based on the guidelines of the European Network for Traumatic Stress - TENTS (ESTSS, 2011a, 2011b), which were confirmed through the PFA-CE 2017-2019 project (PFA-CE, 2017).

The limitation of the research refers to the fact that it was based only on the persons engaged in the rescue mission to minimize the consequences of the earthquake in the Republic of

Türkiye in February 2023 who were willing to participate in the research. In the rescue mission in the Republic of Türkiye, 22 members of the rescue team of the RACP RS, 42 members of the rescue team of the FACP FBİH, 10 members of the rescue team of the DPS DB, and 167 members of the MRS from the entire BiH (МБ БиХ, 2023) participated in the rescue mission in the Republic of Türkiye. The research was conducted with members of the protection and rescue forces of the RACP RS, volunteers from the MRS FBİH, and members of the AF BiH. Members of the MRS FBİH were surveyed from MRS stations: Visoko, Tuzla, Zenica, Novi Grad - Sarajevo, Kakanj, Mostar, and Travnik. In the humanitarian mission to minimize the consequences of the earthquake in the Republic of Türkiye, 10 members of the AF BiH were engaged, consisting of 6 officers, 3 non-commissioned officers, and 1 soldier (МО БиХ, 2023). The final survey was conducted with a sample of 34 respondents. The results of this research should be indicators of finding practical solutions in the management of natural disasters in all three key phases by including the activities of providing psychosocial assistance, i.e., first psychological assistance, as a training module in the planning and implementation of preparedness measures, immediate response measures, and quick response and recovery measures.

Members of the rescue teams from the following organizations: the FACP FBİH, the DPS DB, and the Association for Assistance in Extraordinary Circumstances "WOLF" Foca did not want to participate in the research after seeing the survey questions. This point to the need for new research on the existence and measure of sincere and supportive relationships within work organizations, and the subject of the research would be the level of organizational culture of work organizations. In doing so, it would be examined at what level rescuers and volunteers can openly talk and share problems without fear of consequences, i.e., whether they feel safe to talk about stress and seek help. We encourage future researchers to expand upon this work.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. Results

The research was conducted on a deliberate sample of respondents who were engaged in a rescue mission to minimize the consequences of the earthquake in the cities of Kahramanmaraş and Antakya in the Republic of Türkiye in February 2023. The survey instrument was a survey questionnaire with combined questions. In this part, the results of the research and the final purpose and goal of this empirical research are presented in short.

The majority of respondents (70.59%) stated that they had no training in providing psychological first aid, while seven of them (20.59%) formed multiple answers, and one respondent did not answer this question. These seven respondents (20.59%) believe that, in their work organization, multiple trainings are conducted in providing psychological first aid to the affected population. In the answers offered, it is noted that the variant of multiple answers had a representation of 57.14%. Moreover, only four respondents (11.76%) out of a total of 34 answered that their skills corresponded to the final outcomes of psychological first aid training according to TENTS guidelines (ESTSS, 2011a, 2011b).

Taking into consideration the question *“In my work organization, training is conducted in providing psychological first aid to the injured population, in which I am trained in how to do what?”*, the most frequent answer among respondents is **providing medical first aid** with score 10 (relative frequency 19.05%), followed by the frequency of answer seven with 16.67% for the skills *establishing communication with the victim*, as well as **helping to calm down the stress reactions of the victim**. However, the skill of **assessing the physical injuries of the victim** was recorded six times (14.29%), while the skills of **recognizing the individual needs of the victim**, as well as **assessing the state of mental health of the**

victim were selected by respondents five times (11.90%). The answer **providing the necessary information to the victim** was recorded a total of four times (9.52%).

The collected and analyzed data indicate that organized and systematic training in the provision of psychological first aid is not conducted in the work organizations of the surveyed rescuers and volunteers. Individuals have skills, four of them (11.74%), in providing psychological first aid, but it is quite certain that they did not acquire them through organized training in their organizations.

The majority of respondents (64.71%) stated that they had no training in providing psychological first aid, while seven of them (20.59%) formed multiple answers. Five respondents (14.71%) responded that they are prepared for the situation when **the victim is in a state of shock**. Of these seven respondents (20.59%) combined, two to five offered different situations for which they were prepared through the training in providing psychological first aid to the affected population.

Also, on the question “**Through training in providing psychological first aid to the injured population, I am prepared for situations such as?**”, two variants of multiple answers were recorded, to which the respondents combined two to five (out of the five offered) answers to the situations. In the answers offered, it is noticeable that the variant of multiple answers (**the victim is in a state of shock, the victim cannot meet basic needs, the victim refuses to communicate, the victim refuses help, the victim behaves aggressively**) had a representation of 85.71% of preparedness for the given situation and, as such, represents the recommended outcome of psychological first aid training in accordance with the TENTS guidelines (ESTSS, 2011a, 2011b). Only five respondents (14.70%) out of a total of 34 gave answers that were in line with the TENTS guidelines recommending the training and preparation of rescuers / volunteers to deal with victim's responses to trauma and how to carry with it. The most frequent answer among respondents is that **the victim is in a state of shock** with score 12 (relative frequency of 35.29%), followed by the frequency of answer seven, with 20.59% for the preparedness of the situation when **the victim behaves aggressively**. In situations where **the victim refuses to communicate, when the victim refuses help**, as well as **the victim cannot meet their basic needs** are prepared six responders.

Based on the collected and analyzed responses, it is concluded that the surveyed rescuers and volunteers are not prepared for complex situations. The reason is obvious, as the majority stated that they were not trained in their organizations. Individuals are ready to react to critical situations; they have skills, only six of them (17.64%), but it is clear that they are not trained in their organizations.

On the question “**Through the training of providing psychological first aid to the injured population, I acquired the following skills?**”, the majority of respondents (64.71%) stated that they had no training in providing psychological first aid, while nine of them (26.47%) gave multiple answers. One responder has the skill to recognize physical signs of a victim's distress, while two are able to assess danger to themselves and others. Seven variants of multiple answers were recorded, in which three to ten (out of ten offered) skills that the respondents acquired during the training were combined according to TENTS guidelines (ESTSS, 2011a, 2011b). The full outcomes of psychological first aid training are actually found in the multiple response variant, which had a representation of 33.33%. The analyzed data indicate that only three respondents (8.82%) out of a total of 34 possess all the skills recommended by the TENTS guidelines (ESTSS, 2011a, 2011b).

The most frequent answer among respondents is ***assessment of danger to self and others*** with score 10 (relative frequency of 15.15%) followed by skill ***providing practical help***, whose frequency of answer is eight with 12.12%. Skills such as ***recognizing the victim's physical signs of distress*** and ***recognizing the need to refer the victim to mental specialist services*** were recorded seven times (10.61%), while skills ***assessing the victim's resistance level***, as well as ***gathering information about the victim's needs*** were chosen six times (9.09%). Five (7.58%) respondents are able to recognize ***emotional signs of the victim's distress*** and ***establish non-verbal communication with the victim***. Four of them (6.06%) are able to ***provide psychoeducation***, and three (4.55%) know how to ***establish a good psychological atmosphere in which communication with the victim takes place smoothly***.

The analyzed data indicate that organized and systematic training in the provision of psychological first aid is not conducted in the work organizations of the surveyed rescuers and volunteers. A few individuals have skills, three (8.82%) out of a total of 34, in providing psychological first aid, but it is certain that they did not acquire them through training in their organizations.

The majority of respondents believe that the training aimed at protecting mental health and preventing the harmful effects of stressful situations in their work organization does not meet the challenges they encountered during the rescue mission in the Republic of Türkiye in February 2023, while only three (8.82%) respondents believe that the training mostly meets the challenges. As many as 12 (35.29%) respondents do not know the answer to this question, while the reasons are unknown.

The results suggest that work organizations must adjust their training plans in the coming period. A member's psychological preparation for a potential event can have a decisive impact on the success of the psychological response as well as psychological recovery efforts; therefore, psychological readiness must be included in training plans. Training aimed at protecting mental health and preventing the harmful effects of stressful situations should be taken into consideration, and training planners should include the mental health of their members in the planning process. That is, all employees should undergo appropriate and specialized training that will equip them with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to work in challenging and stressful conditions where psychological first aid is paramount (Brooks et al., 2016).

The majority of respondents expressed the need for training in psychological first aid. Training employees in psychological first aid can improve the sense of camaraderie (belonging to a team/collective) and, at the same time, train employees in peer support. Training in psychological first aid has been found to provide a framework for supporting others following traumatic events and to lead to greater confidence in providing support as well as helping to overcome others' psychological distress (Brooks et al., 2016).

4.2. Discussion

The review and scientific papers conclude that organizations are strongly recommended to provide timely and phase-appropriate mental health services to first responders, such as rescuers and volunteers. Providing mental health services in a disaster is complex. The lack of professional mental health specialists requires the action of lay ("peer") rescuers or volunteers. Before a natural disaster occurs, psychological first aid training will increase confidence and prepare members and the entire team to work in the stressful and mentally complex environment of a natural disaster event. In the context of disaster preparedness planning, it is

necessary to include the provision of dedicated psychological first aid training, as well as the establishment of an organizational support system.

Establishing a disaster mental health policy, as well as a task force with clear operating procedures for timely and effective mental health responses by engaged first responders and volunteers is critical. The establishment of training modules, both for rescuers and volunteers, which will be defined by mental health protection policies and procedures, is of crucial importance. The collected and analyzed data indicate that in the work organizations of the surveyed rescuers and volunteers, there is no organized systemic activity with the aim of establishing and continuously maintaining the psychological resilience of employees. The results suggest that in the coming period, work organizations must organize training plans related to overcoming stressful situations for their employees. The efforts of professionals and lays that provide psychosocial assistance in the circumstances of natural disasters should be aimed at re-establishing a satisfactory and acceptable physical, mental, psychological, social, and economic state of the individual and the community. Continuous maintenance of the psychological well-being of rescuers and volunteers is achieved by including the activities of providing psychosocial assistance in the planning and implementation of preparedness measures, immediate response measures, and quick response and recovery measures (Marceta and Vrucinic, 2022).

In order to identify recommendations for interventions to reduce risk and promote resilience after an incident, previous research assumes that occupations that perform their roles during response to natural disasters are likely to have more training and therefore be more psychologically and mentally prepared (Brooks et al., 2016). In this regard, work organizations are obliged to organize training and prepare employees in order to overcome stressful situations. Organizations should have a clear policy framework on the protection of staff as part of the management of a traumatic event. Managers should be aware of key risk factors and use them when identifying particularly vulnerable groups of employees who may need additional support (Brooks et al., 2016). This includes education and training programs for providers of psychological first aid in an organizational context (supervisors, managers, work colleagues, and health professionals, where relevant) and recipients (who are themselves members), with the aim of peer to peer support. Supervision groups should be led by professionally trained moderators (Малкина-Пых, 2005).

5. CONCLUSION

A part of the findings of a wider research project, which was carried out in the period from March to June 2023, is presented to a sample of respondents – members of the protection and rescue forces of the Republican Administration of Civil Protection of the Republic of Srpska, volunteers from the Mountain Rescue Service of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and members of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who were engaged in a rescue mission to minimize the consequences of the earthquake in the Republic of Türkiye in February 2023.

The fact is that the research is limited and conducted only on persons who were engaged in the rescue mission to minimize the consequences of the February 2023 Türkiye earthquake and were willing to participate in the research. Despite the above, the results of this research should be indicators in finding practical solutions – the incorporating psychosocial assistance activities, such as psychological first aid training module, into preparedness, immediate response, and quick response and recovery measures.

The results of this research determined that the majority of respondents believe that training aimed at protecting mental health and preventing the harmful effects of stressful situations in

their work organization does not meet the challenges they encountered during the rescue mission in the Republic of Türkiye in February 2023 and that there is a need for establishing a program of education and training of rescuers and volunteers in providing psychological first aid. The programming and planning of psychological first aid training modules in the training policies and guidelines of organizations employing rescuers and volunteers is of crucial importance. By including the mentioned module in the training plan, organizations show concern for the mental health of their members, which they prove by maintaining their psychological well-being.

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