

Strengthening Community Mental Health & Psychosocial Support During Emergencies



Providing mental health and psychosocial support is a priority for emergency response and recovery efforts during and after disasters like floods and wildfires, or crises like the COVID-19 virus outbreak.

Disasters can lead to increased mental health concerns, weakened mental health infrastructures, and difficulties coordinating mental health services.¹ If left unaddressed, disasters can have long-term consequences on affected communities.²

Mental health and psychosocial support programs and services help communities recover and enhance resilience after a crisis.³ Addressing, protecting, and

improving people's mental health and psychosocial well-being requires coordinated action from agencies, social non-profits, the government, and the community. PolicyWise compiled evidence and promising practices for community-based mental health and psychosocial support in emergency response and recovery. We reviewed academic and practice-based sources, examined strategic documents, and conducted engagement with the Canadian Red Cross. In this report we summarize what we found. This includes the guiding principles and domains of action for practitioners working on community-based mental health and psychosocial support post-disaster.



Key Terms

Mental health and psychosocial support aims to protect or promote physical well-being and prevent or treat mental disorders after an emergency or disaster.² Mental health and psychosocial support can foster a sense of empowerment and social connectedness among other benefits.⁴

Community-based mental health and psychosocial support is a specific approach to mental health recovery in emergencies that places the community at the centre of recovery activities. It involves the community in as many decisions and processes as possible.³ Implicit in community-based mental health and psychosocial support is the belief that the community can and should lead their recovery.³

Guiding Principles for Community-Based Mental Health & Psychosocial Support

We identified six action-oriented principles of community-based mental health and psychosocial support. These principles fundamentally intertwine with one another.

Principle 1: Protect Human Rights, Dignity & Culture

Protecting human rights, dignity, and culture means providing services that are equitable, appropriate, and accessible to whoever needs them, regardless of gender, age, language, ability, sexuality, or other social characteristics.^{3,5,6} Protecting human rights and culture can strengthen people's sense of dignity. It can help community members feel connected to, and valued for, their culture.

Principle 2: Facilitate Safety, Healing & Calm

Encouraging feelings of safety, healing, and calm can facilitate a sense of security among community members.⁷ Successful community-based mental health and psychosocial support can assist community members in making sense of what has happened, grieving, seeing their strength, finding hope, and moving forward.⁸



Principle 3: Build Community Capacity

Building community capacity means developing existing resources to help a community better respond to its members' needs. It also means ensuring community members can meaningfully participate throughout the recovery process.⁸ Community-based mental health and psychosocial support leverages and develops existing community knowledge and resources alongside that of disaster relief organizations and governments.³ This takes advantage of existing community 'natural supports' by creating opportunities for community participation in response and recovery efforts, cultural practices, and community events and discussions.⁶ Developing community-owned and community-managed social support activities and programs can strengthen community capacity, resiliency, and the ability of the community to respond to future crises.⁹

Principle 4: Integrate & Layer Supports

Developing a system of complementary mental health and psychosocial support, from basic to specialized services, can help meet community needs.⁹⁻¹¹ Integrating these supports into all other response sectors like water, food security, education, and health, is required to ensure efficacy.^{10,12,13} Implemented properly, an integrated and multi-layered support system will eliminate fragmenting and duplicating services.³ This approach requires grounding in the experiences of affected communities to provide people with a sense of control and dignity.¹⁴

Principle 5: Strengthen Community Connections

Focusing on community-based mental health and psychosocial support is an opportunity to improve on the pre-disaster state. Communities can become stronger by building new connections, improving existing bonds, and promoting a strong sense of place.^{8,15} This can encourage resilience and healing. Strengthening community connections means restoring and enhancing aspects of community systems essential to daily life.^{3,16}

Principle 6: Foster Clear Communication

Careful communication related to response activities is required to promote a successful recovery process.¹¹ This includes communication with community members and partners, and internal and external personnel. If communication is clear, audience-appropriate, and timely, it can empower the community to make informed decisions about their recovery process while combatting misinformation and distrust.¹⁷



Domains of Action for Community-Based Mental Health & Psychosocial Support

We identified five inter-connected domains of action for effective community-based mental health and psychosocial support response. Note that action in one domain can impact outcomes in other domains. For clarity, we present each domain separately. We provide a description of the domain, the outcomes associated with action in the domain, and a list of suggested mental health and psychosocial support activities.

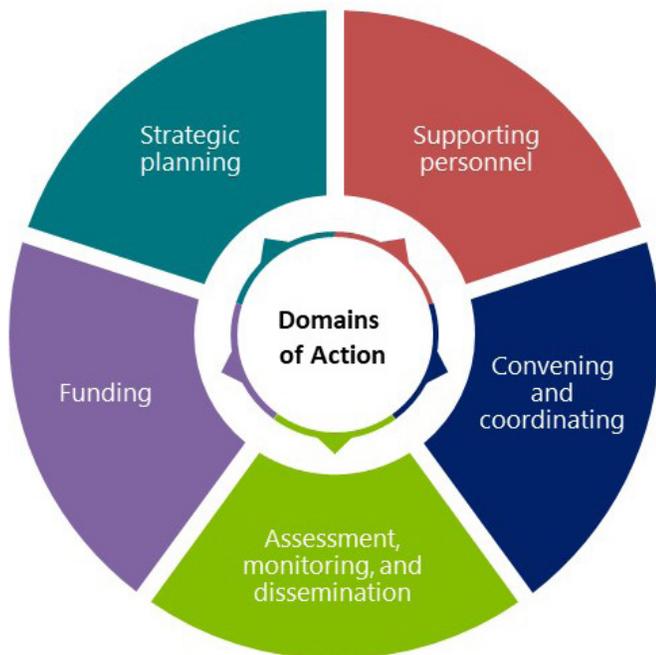


Figure 1. Domains of action for community-based mental health and psychosocial support.



Domain 1: Strategic Planning

Actions in this domain involve defining internal and shared external goals for an effective response, agreeing with partners on the related activities to achieve those goals, and allocating the necessary resources.⁶ Effective strategic planning can facilitate success across other domains of action. Typically, strategic mental health and psychosocial support planning is completed before an emergency. It can also occur during a response.

Acting in this domain can:

- Improve integration and distribution across an organization's service lines and programs.^{2,14,18}
- Enhance post-disaster support and sustainability for the impacted community.^{19,20}
- Improve preparedness for mental health and psychosocial support in disaster response.^{1,2,14,21}
- Increase awareness about mental health and psychosocial support resulting in an efficient and better coordinated response.^{13,21}

Suggested Activities

- Develop a shared framework for recovery. Delineate roles and responsibilities within the organization and across multi sectoral partners.
- Identify and integrate mental health and psychosocial support activities into recovery policies, plans, and programs across relevant service lines.
- Integrate mental health and psychosocial support indicators into plans and policies as well as across service lines.
- Work with government partners to initiate updates to disaster response-related policies, plans, and programs to include mental health and psychosocial support.
- Advocate for sufficient and sustainable funding of mental health and psychosocial support.
- Ensure mental health and psychosocial support activities are budgeted adequately.
- Resource community agencies, non-profits, and service providers to develop strategic plans for disaster response and recovery that include mental health and psychosocial support.
- Work with strategic partners like government, government agencies, and health authorities to develop their response plans for disaster response and recovery that include mental health and psychosocial support.
- Plan for sustainability and legacy of community-based mental health and psychosocial support in recovery plans.

Domain 2: Funding

Actions in this domain involve going beyond funding provision to include assistance with grant applications and collaborative and participatory approaches to community funding. Collaborative funding involves multiple funders in the process.¹¹ Participatory funding is equity-oriented and engages community members in the process of developing grants and related decision-making.²² This approach can disrupt power imbalances between funders and communities by centring community perspectives and needs.²³

Acting in this domain can:

- Prioritize and adequately resource mental health and psychosocial support.^{2,3}
- Strengthen relationships and communication developed between funders and the organizations they fund.²⁴⁻²⁶
- Increase community empowerment and participation in mental health and psychosocial support funding and service delivery decisions.^{23,24,27}
- Assist organizations throughout the grant process.²²
- Improve the ability to adapt and adjust funding quickly throughout the granting process and increase flexibility to respond to community needs and challenges.²³
- Increase equitable access to funding.^{22,26}
- Reduce funding competition and duplication of activities.^{22,26}

Suggested Activities

- Use proactive grant-making where appropriate by identifying strategic mental health goals ahead of emergencies or disasters.
- Mobilize initial funds for pressing mental health and psychosocial support needs while contracts are being finalized.
- Develop relationships with other funders involved in mental health and psychosocial support.
- Have dedicated funding streams for priority populations.
- Take trust-based approaches to funding for Indigenous grants that provide greater flexibility and fewer reporting requirements.
- Shift to participatory grant-making where appropriate. This includes ceding decision-making power about aspects like strategy and criteria behind funding decisions.
- Seek community feedback on grants and adjust if needed, particularly for priority populations or organizations.
- Engage communities and establish collaborative community partnerships to discuss funding decisions.
- Enable opportunities for applicants to seek clarification about grant applications, and for grant recipients to engage in ongoing communication about the grant or reporting.
- Provide long-term and flexible funding that recognizes the lengthy and often cyclical nature of mental health and psychosocial support-related recovery.
- Dedicate funding to build and strengthen collaborative networks for mental health and psychosocial support.
- Advocate for dedicated mental health and psychosocial support funding.
- Track and report successes with funding partners.
- Capture community-level outcomes, like capacity and resiliency, as opposed to individual-level outcomes.
- Ensure donor reports illustrate mental health and psychosocial support activities.



Domain 3: Assessment, Monitoring & Dissemination

Actions in this domain involve collecting knowledge of community resources, issues, and gaps throughout response and recovery. They also extend to sharing knowledge with strategic partners and community members to inform the coordination and delivery of services that respond to community needs and priorities.^{2,3} Using common assessment and monitoring frameworks can help to demonstrate the value and impact of programs in emergency settings and allow others to benefit from lessons learned.⁹

Acting in this domain can:

- Enhance the ability to identify community concerns, gaps, and available resources.^{2,4,5,28}
- Enhance ongoing and consistent monitoring and evaluation of mental health and psychosocial support.^{2,3,5}
- Foster adaptive and responsive mental health and psychosocial support that align with community needs and capacity.²
- Increase sharing of information and recommendations across the community, different sectors, and system partners.³
- Increase community ownership of data and community leadership to respond to data.^{6,18,28}
- Strengthen culturally relevant mental health and psychosocial supports and improve availability and access.^{3,4,16,20}
- Increase feelings of assuredness and support about the recovery process from community members.^{2,27}
- Ensure that indicators and measures are relevant and appropriate to the community, including cultural components.⁹



Suggested Activities

- Conduct participatory asset mapping and context analysis of local communities, including an assessment of the current situation, resources, divisions, services, and practices.
- Develop a process in collaboration with other service lines to update the emergency response plan based on available inputs.
- Create a centralized information system for real-time data collection on the mental health and psychosocial well-being situation, priorities, resource allocation, and mutual aid management.
 - Consider what data is needed, how it will be used, and what analysis assistance may be required in the specific disaster environment.
 - Consider how to capture mental health and psychosocial support use across service lines.
- Implement a data collection, analysis, and reporting system, and ensure a centralized point of access for reports and data.
 - Collect both qualitative and quantitative data to capture lived experience and evolving needs in the community.
- Continually assess and monitor gaps and opportunities based on community needs.
 - Track service provider needs and capacity to meet community needs.
 - Use the information to prevent service gaps and duplication.
 - Implement in-depth situation analyses as appropriate.
 - Re-adjust evaluation goals and activities based on community data and knowledge.



- Document the recovery process to inform future disaster planning and to facilitate learning from the present recovery phases.
- Monitor and evaluate programs in relation to planned activities with pre-defined indicators.
- Develop inter-agency indicators for mental health and psychosocial support work and use shared indicators to evaluate programs.
- Assist agencies in the identification and collection of data for mental health and psychosocial support indicators.
- Build and strengthen reliable and accessible systems to disseminate information and engage in consistent and ongoing information sharing to community.
- Engage community to participate in validating and disseminating information.

Domain 4: Convening & Coordinating

Actions in this domain involve identifying the key players in the mental health and psychosocial support landscape and bringing them together for collaborative planning and delivery of services.¹ Formal documentation, like Terms of Reference, can guide collaboration by identifying shared goals and ways of working.²⁸ Establishing safe and trusting spaces to collaborate can improve participants' comfort and ability to share honestly.^{6,18}

Acting in this domain can:

- Identify and facilitate strategic connections across sectors and systems.^{3,14,19}
- Improve consensus-making among diverse mental health and psychosocial support partners.¹
- Increase participation in collaboration and decision-making for marginalized groups, smaller organizations, and lesser-known players.^{3,19}
- Increase efficacy of mental health and psychosocial support through identification of shared goals and individual responsibilities to pursue goals.^{3,28}
- Enhance community ownership and delivery of collaborative mental health and psychosocial support, and therefore increase community capacity.^{2,3,27}

Suggested Activities

- Identify key players for multisectoral collaboration, such as community agencies, service providers, local, provincial, national, and Indigenous governments, and community champions.
- Identify marginalized groups that may lack opportunities to participate in decision-making and collaboration and prioritize their inclusion.
- Embed within the community by:
 - Attending community events.
 - Attending committee meetings as an observer.
 - Engaging in informal conversations and check-ins with community members.
 - Assisting the community to identify priority issues and actions, as needed.
- Follow existing recovery frameworks, adapting mental health and psychosocial support components as needed to the unique disaster context.



- Collaboratively determine who is best placed to take on roles and responsibilities for coordination and committees.
- Develop and expand sustainable structures for coordinating mental health and psychosocial support by:
 - Strategically including key players in coordination activities and removing barriers to their attendance and participation.
 - Providing guidance on coordination structure activities and processes.
 - Developing shared goals with collaborators.
 - Providing recovery expertise and evidence as needed.
 - Encouraging collaborators to share information and identify gaps and needs.
 - Creating an exit strategy for participation in coordination structures.
- Maintain and strengthen existing coordination structures by:
 - Sharing information to identify gaps and needs.
 - Building capacity by mentoring skills, providing resources, and encouraging confidence.
 - Facilitating functional referral mechanisms between agencies and sectors.



Domain 5: Supporting Personnel **Suggested Activities**

Actions in this domain involve ensuring people providing mental health and psychosocial support have access to the resources they need to carry out their work, including mental and physical health care. Stress is an expected risk for personnel responding to emergency or disaster environments.²⁹ If they are members of the affected community, they may experience the impact of the event first-hand. Mental health care can include counselling, workshops on self-care skills, and informal check-ins from partners unrelated to a grant or program.¹³

Acting in this domain can:

- Increase personnel confidence and skills to provide mental health and psychosocial support.^{1,6}
- Enhance knowledge and skills for internal personnel to provide contextually appropriate mental health and psychosocial support.²
- Improve mental health and psychosocial support for internal and external personnel providing response services.^{2,13}
- Strengthen relationships and partnerships between funders and community organizations.

- Provide training and ongoing professional development for staff and volunteers on community development and community-based mental health and psychosocial support.
- Integrate basic mental health and psychosocial support modules into training curriculum for emergency response professionals.
- Integrate basic community development modules into training curriculum for emergency response professionals.
- Prepare personnel for the emergency context with briefings on the nature of the crisis, the population affected, local cultural attitudes and practices, trauma-informed care, and community development approaches. Ensure knowledge transfer to new personnel.
- Establish and maintain a response structure that supports personnel and reflects the integration of mental health and psychosocial support across service lines.
- Ensure mental health and psychosocial support is readily available for individuals providing response and recovery services.
- Check-in with internal personnel and encourage self-care by creating opportunities to participate in well-being activities.
- Check-in with external caregivers and service providers regularly to learn and provide support.



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