

# Cultural Sensitivity in Disaster Preparedness and Response

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Following major disasters, survivors may experience a variety of distressing emotional, behavioral, and cognitive symptoms or, most commonly, resilience. The acute and longer-term reactions of affected disaster survivors depend, in part, on the type and scope of the disaster or public health emergency as well as the extent of their injuries and fate of their kin. Importantly, their psychological reactions are influenced by sociocultural factors, including their worldview, history, spiritual beliefs, and cultural norms. These all affect the ways survivors experience and manifest symptoms in the aftermath of specific types of disaster-related events (for example, the death of a child or spouse) or hardships such as long-term unemployment. Thus, cultural sensitivity is an important consideration for disaster preparedness and response personnel since it plays a major role in how people behave and cope, as well as their long-term recovery trajectories in the aftermath.<sup>1</sup>

Although disaster behavioral health is considered a key component of disaster preparedness and response,

there has been little research to date that has documented the benefits and potentially harmful outcomes of psychosocial interventions across cultures (Beaton and Murphy, 2002; Beaton et al., 2009). One such study, a cross-cultural investigation of

non-Western survivors in a rural sample of Indian villagers following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, found that prolonged grief disorder (PGD)—and not posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—was the most common psychopathological



At least **350** different languages are spoken in homes across the United States.

SOURCE: United States Census Bureau, November 15, 2015,  
<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-185.html>

<sup>1</sup> Cultural awareness and sensitivity is defined as, "the knowledge and interpersonal skills that allow providers to understand, appreciate, and work with individuals from cultures other than their own. It involves an awareness and acceptance of cultural differences, self-awareness, knowledge of a patient's culture, and adaptation of skills." (The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2011) Cultural sensitivity thus relies upon a sophisticated understanding of a peoples' history, their beliefs, their ways of coping, strengths and views of mental illness which, together, can inform the assessment and treatment of disaster survivors.

outcome and was associated with a different set of risk factors than PTSD. Such a finding has important implications since the identified risk for PTSD and PGD factors may be of a heuristic value for disaster personnel in terms of assessment and screening and because widely accepted treatment approaches for these distinctive disorders—which may co-occur—differ.

Another important disaster preparedness and response implication of cultural sensitivity is that cultural adaptations and modifications of crisis therapies such as Psychological First Aid may improve their acceptability and outcomes (Kumpfer et al., 2002).

Findings from international cross-cultural post-disaster interventions suggest that cultural sensitivity is key (Rajkumar et al., 2015). Lipinski et al., (2016), for example, note that, while offering psychosocial intervention for disaster survivors is a common “reactionary strategy,” caution should be exercised because: (1) Western-centric interventions are typically employed without adapting them to specific cultures and (2) such interventions may not be provided by qualified practitioners. To assess the benefits and potentially harmful effects of post-disaster psychosocial interventions, Lipinski et al., (2016) conducted a systematic review of psychosocial interventions (n = 10)

offered to both children and adult survivors of the 2004 Asian tsunami drawn from a variety of cultural and ethnic groups in the affected regions of India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. While the authors concluded that most of the interventions reviewed had been adapted to the target cultural group and possessed a high degree of cultural specificity, they expressed some concerns and cited outcome data from a minority of reviewed investigations suggesting potentially harmful outcomes such as an increase in post-trauma symptomatology (Lipinski et al., 2016). This finding touches on another compelling reason for cultural sensitivity—that is, the ethical imperative to ensure that

## Snapshot of Race and Hispanic Origin in the United States

[July 1, 2016]

<b>76.9%</b>	<b>White alone</b>
<b>13.3%</b>	<b>Black or African American alone</b>
<b>1.3%</b>	<b>American Indian and Alaska Native alone</b>
<b>5.7%</b>	<b>Asian alone</b>
<b>0.2%</b>	<b>Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone</b>
<b>2.6%</b>	<b>Two or More Races</b>
<b>17.8%</b>	<b>Hispanic or Latino*</b>



Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.

SOURCE: United States Census Bureau, July 1, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/AGE765210>

post-disaster interventions that are developed by the dominant culture do not negatively affect a disaster survivor's cultural values, practice, and identity (Sanders, 2000).

Closer to home, being mindful of a community's cultural needs anywhere in the United States can help reduce psychological distress in those affected during disaster response and recovery periods. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (<https://www.phe.gov/Preparedness/planning/abc/Pages/linguistic-facts.aspx>) notes five principles that disaster response personnel need to consider to better communicate with, and deliver services to, diverse groups.

**Awareness and acceptance of differences** facilitates a recognition that response personnel are often different from and may not represent community groups with regard to sociodemographic characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, language, gender identity, and ability.

**Assessing one's own cultural values** helps identify and examine personal biases and stereotypes that can hinder communications and service quality. **Understanding and managing the dynamics of difference** encourages cultural humility and informs methods regarding how various cultures receive, interpret, and express information. **Development of cultural knowledge** provides insight into customs and values relevant to preparedness, response procedures, and health and illness beliefs. Moreover, the **ability to**

**adapt preparedness and response activities to fit different cultural contexts** is crucial to assure that community cultural needs are respected and disaster management procedures align with an affected community's cultural values.

As a complement to these principles, the following additional practical strategies and tactics can enhance cultural sensitivity in disaster preparedness and response:

- To the degree possible, the make-up of disaster preparedness staff and teams should be diverse as well as reflect representation of the communities served in the area.
- Disaster planning and preparedness efforts should actively engage with community groups to assess needs related to culture and language, guide policies and procedures that are culturally sensitive, embrace the types of resources that support cultural beliefs and practices, and direct outreach efforts so that all community members are equitably informed. These can be achieved by meeting with formal and informal community leaders, collaborating with community-based organizations, and holding community forums in accessible locations and communicating in local languages.
- When possible, prepare members of diverse community groups to mobilize and play an active role during disaster events. Done in advance, these planning and

preparedness strategies can enhance effectiveness in executing disaster response and management procedures.

These recommended planning and preparedness efforts, based on cultural sensitivity considerations, will better address the recovery needs of diverse community groups. ■

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Cover photo: MARICAO, Puerto Rico, Nov. 27, 2017 - The National Guard and FEMA supply meals and water to the Montoso community. Photo by Eduardo Martinez.

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