

Disaster Preparation & Response

Older Adults and Disaster: Assets and Challenges

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U.S. Baby Boomers II



‘Baby Boomers’ have started to retire and will increase in the next ten years

- Enormous pressure on retirement systems, health care facilities, and other services
- Major implications for substance abuse and mental health prevention and treatment

Depression and Anxiety

- One in five older adults has a significant mental disorder
 - Primary psychiatric illness: 16 percent
 - Dementia complicated by psychiatric symptoms: 3 percent
- Depression affects 3-7 percent
- Anxiety affects 11 percent
 - Frequent comorbidity among anxiety, depression, and physical illness.

Consequences

- An estimated one in five older Americans (19%) may be affected by combined difficulties with alcohol and medication misuse.
- Aging-related changes make older adults more vulnerable to adverse alcohol effects
 - More impairment at a given blood alcohol content (BAC) level
 - Interactive effects of alcohol, chronic illness, and medication
- Older adults are three times as likely to develop a mental disorder with a lifetime diagnosis of alcohol abuse.

Behavioral Health Resources

- Current systems are strained
- Many clinicians are uncomfortable working with older adults
- Aging workforce
- Low workforce recruitment rates

Rise in Disasters

- In 2003, 254 million people were affected by natural hazards— nearly three times as many as in 1990.
- **Intensity** and **number** of disasters continue to increase.
 - Kashmir earthquake in 2005 killed over 90,000 people.
 - Tsunamis in South and Southeast Asia in 2004 killed over 186,000 people.



HURRICANE RITA EVACUATION: Nursing home and hospital patients are placed in baggage carriers before boarding Sept. 23 at the Port Arthur, Texas, airport. (Houston Chronicle)

Special Needs of Older Adults in Disasters

- The aging process puts older adults at increased risk
 - **Physiologically**
 - **Psychologically**
 - **Socially**
- Planning often overlooks these needs

Planning Needs of Older Adults

- Communication
- Literacy
- Mobility
- Visual
- Hearing
- Cognitive
- Cultural

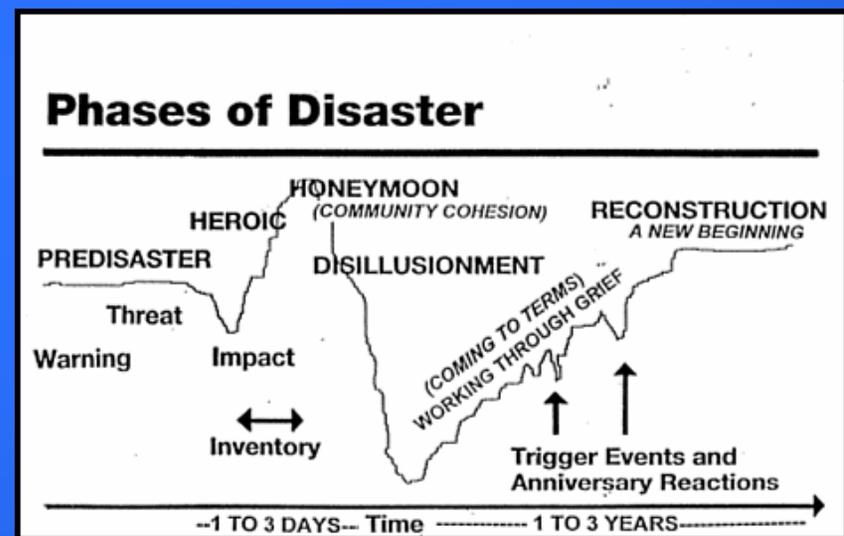


**What are special needs
in disaster preparation and response?**

Phases of Disaster

Older adults experience accumulated loss and trauma during disasters

- Loss of loved ones
- Loss of possessions collected over a lifetime
- Needs change during the phases of disaster
 - Pre-disaster
 - Post-Disaster



SAMHSA, 2004

Post-Disaster Recovery

Goal of returning to pre-disaster level of functioning



A resident of New Orleans at the front of his home following Hurricane Katrina. FEMA photo.

How does grief or loss affect one's ability to cope in the aftermath of disaster?

Grief Reaction Appears to be Universal

Disbelief

- Initial reaction of grief as one come to terms with actual loss

Questioning

- Seeking reasons
- Making the events believable by knowing its cause

Anger

- Non-directional and emotional
- Semi-violent

Guilt/Blame

- Seeking the source of responsibility for the disaster
Focused on self, others, or God/fate

Main Components of Grief Reaction

- Desperation
 - Avoiding eye contact
 - Overwhelmed with resignation/dismay
 - Sense of hopelessness
- Powerlessness
 - Sense of loss of ability to impact life events
 - Increased emotional response
 - Multiple feelings of fear, hostility, love, guilt/hate

Older adults may be overwhelmed with the process of completing application paperwork to obtain financial assistance.

Special Populations to Consider

- Dementia/Alzheimer's
- Mobility issues
- Significant physical disabilities
- Non-native language speakers
- Caregivers who are older adults

Older adults are particularly vulnerable because of increased time since formal education, decreased sensory abilities (i.e., vision and hearing), and declining cognitive functions.

Cultural Sensitivity

- Being aware of the various cultural groups affected by the disaster. This includes:
 - Ethnic & racial groups hardest hit by the disaster
 - Language barriers
 - Suspicion of the government
- Be sensitive to:
 - Dominant language/English fluency
 - Immigration experience and status
 - Family values
 - Cultural values and traditions

How is disaster managed by different cultures?

Older Adults are Assets in Disaster

- Pre-disaster
 - **Identification** of special needs older adults
 - **Inform** needs of older adults population
 - Community **outreach**
 - Increase public **awareness**
 - Create a culture of **preparedness** (i.e. Florida's Elderly Ready communities)
- Post-disaster
 - Model **resiliency** and successful coping
 - **Support** other older adults and identify those needing services

Older Adults as Partners

■ **Planning Phase:**

- Identify areas in which many older adults reside (high-rise communities, assisted living centers, etc)
- Specify additional planning considerations (i.e., the need for additional evacuation time)
- Ensure older adult community “buy-in” and trust prior to a disaster

Older Adults as Partners II

■ **During the Disaster:**

- Older adults may assist in “talking” friends into evacuating
- Share knowledge of the needs of their neighbors (i.e., if a neighbor requires oxygen or if a neighbor does not have access to communication channels (telephone, television, etc))
- Provide companionship during an evacuation

Older Adults as Partners III

■ **Response Phase:**

- Lead support groups for younger populations and share their resilience because they have survived similar experiences
- Serve as community leaders
- Share their knowledge of community resources
- Provide linkages to community and churches

Partnerships

- Form relationships with key service systems that work with diverse older adult populations, including:
 - Aging service providers (i.e. U.S. Area Agencies on Aging)
 - Senior centers and congregate living
 - Independent living centers
 - Personal care providers (i.e. primary care physicians)
 - Veteran organizations (i.e. Veterans Administration)
 - Homeless service providers
 - Pharmacies
 - Volunteer organizations
- Aging experts need to have a seat at the disaster planning and response table

For More Information

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