Positive and negative postdisaster psychological adjustment among adult survivors of the Southeast Asian earthquake–tsunami

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Abstract

Objective: This study explored psychosocial factors associated with psychological adjustment among survivors of a severe natural disaster. Methods: Two hundred sixty-seven adult Thai survivors of the 2004 Southeast Asian earthquake–tsunami were surveyed. Results: At 6 months following the disaster, percentages of survivors who reported positive and negative adjustment were 34% and 40%, respectively. For positive adjustment, best predictors were predisaster employment, increased arousal, and frequent support seeking. Support seeking also partially mediated the association between arousal and positive adjustment. For negative adjustment, infrequent support seeking and increased intrusion and arousal were the best predictors. Arousal was a partial mediator between intrusion and negative adjustment, and support seeking also partially mediated the influence of intrusion and arousal on negative adjustment. Conclusion: Mental health programs for survivors of natural disasters should focus on promoting active coping strategies such as support seeking, strengthening of support networks, and management of posttraumatic stress symptoms to facilitate adjustment.

Keywords: Post-disaster Adjustment; Post-traumatic Growth; Southeast Asian Earthquake-Tsunami

Introduction

Earthquakes and the accompanying tsunami often generate massive destruction, affecting large populations and destroying the entire infrastructure of countries in a short period. In the aftermath, the threat of destruction may continue for weeks or months with the possibility of repeated aftershocks. Earthquake survivors not only have to face physical injuries and economic losses, but also need to cope with emotional reactions to the loss of livelihood, loss of loved ones, and displacement of homes [1,2]. Moreover, severe natural disasters such as mega-earthquakes greatly defy individuals’ perceptions of their own abilities and of assumptions about the benevolence, predictability, and controllability of the world. Its occurrence may thus provide opportunities for individuals to reevaluate their assumptive worldviews, to develop new coping strategies, and to move beyond predisaster levels of adaptation [3,4]. In order to provide effective mental health intervention programs following earthquakes, a greater understanding of factors associated with adjustment of survivors is important.

Current literature on disaster psychiatry tends to focus on negative adjustment of survivors. The prevalence of psychiatric sequelae reported by earthquake survivors in Western countries is as high as 85% for acute stress symptoms, 14–87% for posttraumatic stress disorder, and 27–85% for psychiatric morbidity [1,2,5]. Predictors of negative adjustment to natural disaster include female gender, family psychiatry history, neurotic or introverted personality, proximity to epicenter, traumatic exposure, and postdisaster life events such as loss, relocation, and inadequate social support [6–8].

Recent research has documented that positive changes following trauma and adversity are possible and typically manifest in increased appreciation of life, a sense of greater personal strength, improved relationship with others, and...