The 2004 Tsunami in Penang, Malaysia: Early Mental Health Intervention

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Abstract

Disasters, natural or man-made, bring numerous health care challenges. In any crisis, mental health programs are a requirement during both the acute and postemergency phases. In the Asian tsunami on December 26, 2004, some of the northwestern coastal areas of Malaysia, particularly the island of Penang, were affected with devastating effects on the residents. Such disasters can predispose to mental health problems among the affected people. An early mental health intervention program was carried out in Balik Pulau, Penang, an area badly affected by the tsunami. The objective of the intervention program was to identify the victims, counsel them, make referrals if necessary, and provide help and resources to prevent the development of mental health problems. Penang residents identified as tsunami victims by the local health authorities were recruited. A group of health care workers, school teachers, village authorities, and volunteers were trained to carry out the crisis intervention program by health care workers experienced in crisis interventions. A total of 299 adults participated in the crisis intervention program, with follow-up assessments being made 4 to 6 weeks later. At the follow-up assessment, 1\% of the victims had a problem and they were then referred for further medical assessment. This indicates that the intervention program in the first 2 weeks after the tsunami disaster with referrals to medical services may have helped stabilize the victims.

Keywords

Asian Tsunami, disaster, mental health intervention, psychosocial intervention

Introduction

The Asian Tsunami occurred on December 26, 2004, following by an earthquake with an intensity of 9.0 on the Richter scale in the Indian Ocean, north of Simaeulue Island, off the western coast of Sumatra Indonesia. The tsunami killed more than 230,000 people from 13 countries.