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PROVIDING CARE AND COMFORT WHEN DISASTER STRIKES

CARE teams dispatched by the National CARE Management System are trained and ready to respond in times of a crisis – lending emotional and psychological support to survivors, affected families and even the counsellors themselves. Vivienne Ng, Deputy Director and Senior Principal Clinical Psychologist of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), shares how these CARE teams reach out to those affected.

Picture this, a multitude of agencies is rushing to the scene of an air crash. Immediate issues that require attention are the on-scene chaos and confusion, as well as casualties and relatives of victims. Key to dealing with the range of emotional and psychological repercussions from such a crisis, such as acute distress, severe shock, anxiety, confusion and frustration due to the lack of information or perhaps the loss of a loved one, are personnel from the CARE (Care Action in Response to Emergencies) teams.

With the CARE teams consisting of responders from various government agencies and other volunteers, including experienced counsellors and social workers, they are able to provide psychological and emotional first aid to the families and the rescue workers alike. The airlines affected in the disaster also participate by sending their representatives to be part of the CARE team.

CARE TEAMS IN ACTION

Shortly after a crisis breaks, the Relatives Holding Area (RHA) is activated and the CARE teams are dispatched to this centrally located meeting point where families and those affected can go to retrieve more information about the incident and the victims.

Recalling an aviation-related incident in 2000 involving Singapore Airlines obtain flight SQ 006 in Taiwan, Ng, who was part of the CARE team that was sent to Taiwan, recalled, “I remember it being very chaotic at the airport and the hotel in Taipei where the victims’ next-of-kin were put up. My team had to try and calm these families as they were highly anxious and constantly demanded more information.”

Working hand-in-hand with airline representatives, Ng and her team administered psychosocial assistance to the families affected by helping them overcome the trauma and even attending to their welfare needs. “I spoke to a lady whose husband was a cabin crew member. She tearfully told me he was a wonderful husband and father and that he lived a full life. There were many similar cases at the time and our job was to listen, affirm, support and help them in every way that we can,” said Ng.

TRAINED TO PROVIDE CARE

To qualify as a crisis responder, volunteers, counsellors and social workers are sent on a three-day national care management course conducted by the National CARE Management System (NCMS), a multi-ministry network dedicated to crisis management. The multiminsty aspect of the programme allows CARE officers to share their experiences and to better designate and specify the roles they play in various disasters or crises. In the skills training component of the programme, trainees role-play and practise communication skills to better provide psychological first-aid. For example, honing listening skills is a major component in the training, whereby the trainee responders are taught how to listen to those in need, understand their situation and provide the appropriate counsel.

Responders also take part in large-scale simulations, which are jointly organised with other agencies. For example, the CARE team actively participates in Airport Emergency Exercises conducted by Changi Airport Group at Changi Airport and Seletar Airport in preparation for aviation-related incidents in the vicinity of the airports. These exercises expose the responders to simulated emergency conditions such as air crashes. It also allows them to become familiar with the roles of other agencies involved. “These exercises are important because they act as stress tests for all the agencies involved, so that they can be psychologically, mentally and operationally ready when disasters occur,” Ng explained.

ENSURING THE WELLBEING OF COUNSELLORS

Even rescuers and responders may experience what Ng refers to as vicarious traumatisation or indirectly experiencing someone else’s trauma through an empathetic connection, while they are dealing with a crisis onsite. “It is difficult to prepare for every single scenario when a disaster occurs. This is especially tough on the CARE officers and volunteers who are not as experienced or thoroughly trained,” said Ng.

Therefore, to take care of the wellbeing of the CARE officers, measures have been put in place to make sure that they can cope with the stress and continue to provide aid to those in need. For example, leaders are appointed in each team to monitor and assess how the rest of the team is coping and ensure that they are still able to function as responders while managing the crisis.

Part of MCYS' role is also to conduct Critical Incident Stress Debrief sessions during and after the incident to provide CARE team members closure and ensure their psychological and emotional wellbeing.

Ng believes that at the end of the day, the CARE teams are there to meet the emotional needs and attend to the well-being of relatives, which could mean ensuring that they have enough food and rest, helping families with logistical arrangements, linking them to community resources or simply listening to their troubles. "The volunteers and counsellors want to help because it is a rare opportunity to become empathetically attuned to others," Ng said. "Instead of merely watching these events unfold on television, we want to do our part and make things better for those affected."