

TRAUMA, MIDDLE EAR DISEASE AND THE TSUNAMI DISASTER

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Trauma impacts on the communication of many people in a community affected by disaster. People affected by trauma have less capacity to concentrate and listen at the very time that there are huge demands on them to take in new information, act on it as well as to pass it to others. Many people in undeveloped parts of the world also have listening difficulties related to childhood middle ear disease that compounds communication issues related to trauma. This article describes some of those issues and strategies to improve communication in disaster relief.

People affected by trauma may be preoccupied, forgetful and confused. Trauma may also compound widespread listening problems. Persistent childhood middle ear disease of the type experienced by the poor can result in widespread adult listening problems (hearing loss and auditory processing problems). Work amongst Indigenous people indicates that 50% or more of the adult population can have listening problems that result from childhood middle ear disease.

Factors that contribute to children experiencing persistent middle ear disease (overcrowded housing, poor nutrition, and limited medical attention) are common in many developing countries. Many adults in developing countries have some degree of permanent hearing loss and auditory processing problems. Most people know about hearing loss but not auditory processing problems. Auditory processing has been described as 'what we do with what we hear'. People with auditory processing problems have difficulties understanding what is said, following directions as well as learning to read and spell. People may have difficulties with auditory memory so that it is difficult to remember verbally presented information. One common problem for people with auditory processing difficulties is listening in the presence of background noise - auditory figure ground. While people may cope with communication one-to-one in a quiet environment, they have difficulties when there is background noise and more than one speaker.

Difficulties listening and communicating are likely to be common among local workers helping with the aid effort as well as those receiving aid. Listening will be particularly difficult in the noisy conditions created by crowded housing and camps. Those with listening difficulties are likely to have most difficulties in meetings, even informal meetings as well as some difficulties in one to one communication. Meetings with

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unfamiliar people talking about unfamiliar topics will be most difficult. People with listening difficulties may avoid such meetings or become anxious about getting things wrong and appearing stupid. Some strategies to improve communications in meetings or one-to-one are as follows:

- keep meetings short and to the point;
- tell people at the beginning of the meeting what will be discussed. If possible have an agenda for meetings that is handed out, or is on a white board or on a large piece of paper. Generally use visual cues to help communicate;
- discuss one topic at a time and stay on that topic-don't jump between topics. Make it clear when you are moving onto a new topic;
- say things simply and repeat important information;
- keep background noise during meetings to a minimum, if possible choose settings away from other noise intruding;
- have breaks in meetings where people have time to discuss issues among themselves, especially if it appears some people are confused;
- if appropriate write down key words with important information and put them up so that people can see them. At the end of the meeting have someone summarise the things discussed pointing to the key words or phrases that people can see.
- Use visual cues to help clarify what is said.

The communication of those with listening problems will be more impacted by the tsunami because routines that have helped them to cope have gone. Routines enable people to know what to expect without having to rely on listening. Feelings of loss and grief will be general, but those with listening problems may be more affected by disruption to routines. Try to re-establish old routines. If this is not possible then establish new routines that are as close as possible to old routines. Warn of any changes to routines and understand that the confusion and distress experienced by many may be related to both trauma and listening problems.

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