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## **Conceptual approaches to rendering urgent psychological help to the victims of emergencies**

**Abstract.** The article considers the special features of an extreme psychologist work when rendering urgent psychological help to the population affected by an emergency. The author gives the detailed classification of the types of emergencies where the help of an extreme psychologist can be needed. The article also considers the features of the psychologist work in the center of emergency and main principles of a psychologist work with victims.

**Key words:** urgent psychological help, victim, emergency.

The notion of “psychological help” reflects a kind of reality, a certain psychosocial practice the domain of which is a range of questions, difficulties and problems related to mental life of a person. Psychological help is a way of activity for helping person and community in solving a wide range of problems of a mental life of a person in the society <sup>1</sup>. What determinates the content of the psychological help? Even the first approach to the characteristic and content of this notion, without paying attention to different positions, researches and view on the problem, makes clear that the content of psychological help is to provide emotional, notional and existential support to a person or society in difficult situations that can happen during their personal or social existence.

The phenomenon of help always existed in human society but only in the middle of the XX century it transformed to social institution. This transformation gave life to a range of new professionals: social worker, consulting psychologist,

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<sup>1</sup> Бондаренко А.Ф. Психологическая помощь: теория и практика. — Изд. 3-е, испр. и доп. — М.: Независимая фирма “Класс”, 2001. — 336 с.

and psychologist-psychotherapist. And this list does not include the common figures of priest, pastor, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. More detailed differentiation of the domain of activities of these specialists demands deeper analyses of the history of the foundation of psychological help as a particular social institution <sup>2</sup>.

The special urgency this category took in the late eighties of the XX century when the activation of the ways to consider the posttraumatic disorder in crisis and military psychology led to formation of a notion “psychological trauma” (psychotrauma) - an event treated by a person as a threat to his existence, an event that break his normal life and becomes for this person a traumatic event that means a shock, a certain experience <sup>3</sup>.

Unfortunately, due to many emergencies that happened in our country during late years this phenomenon arose a new wave of interest. Today the psychologists and psychotherapists more often have to work with people experienced a psychic trauma due to global natural or anthropogenic catastrophes <sup>4</sup>.

The main feature of a psycho trauma is a loss of faith that life is organized in a certain order and can be controlled. The trauma influences the sense of time and can change the vision of the past, present and future. By the intensity of emotions the traumatic stress can be compared to all previous life. That is why it seems to be the most considerable event in life, a kind of a border between what was happened before and after this traumatic event, and what will happen in future.

Earlier the main concerns were about such consequences of extreme situations as quantity of deaths, somatic diseases and traumas. Nowadays the specialists worry about the consequences of traumatic events for psychosocial and mental health of people. Among the people experienced a psychotrauma, 80% live their normal life, and 20% some time later (2-6 months) have certain problems in

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<sup>2</sup> Осухова Н.Г. Психологическая помощь в трудных и экстремальных ситуациях: Учебное пособие для студ. высш. учеб. заведений. 2-е изд., испр. М.: Академия, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Решетников М.М. Психическая травма. СПб: Восточно-Европейский Институт психоанализа, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Малкина-Пых И. Г. Психологическая помощь в кризисных ситуациях – М.: Изд-во Эксмо, 2005. – 960 с.

one or several domains of their lives: affective, psychosocial, professional or psychosomatic <sup>5</sup>.

These facts in many ways determined the formation and development of a practice of rendering the urgent psychological help to the victims of emergencies. We state that immediate rendering of an urgent psychological help to an affected person in the center of an emergency allows preventing many negative mental consequences and averting the transformation of a psychopathological process to a chronic form.

Our approach to rendering psychological help is rather different from the “academic approach” generally used today <sup>6</sup>. The special features of our approach are:

- The modern psychological science does not have today a common conception that could explain the reasons of mental disorders of the people under the conditions of an emergency. Today many representatives of worldwide science try to replace the lack of such conception by a psychological phenomenon named “posttraumatic stress disorders” (PTSD).

We think that the influence of an emergency of natural, anthropogenic and social origin to mental health of a person is much wider than the PTSD phenomenon and it includes socio-psychological, information and organizing aspects.

For instance, there is a rather serious problem of management during an emergency. People that make decisions often do not know and do not consider the psychological consequences of the actions they do and this can worsen this tense situation.

A special place in the system of psychological protection from the consequences of an emergency is given to informational-psychological aspect. When working in the center of an emergency we often have to observe how mass media retranslate to people’s consciousness the sense of despair and destruction in

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<sup>5</sup> Пергаменщик Л.А. Кризисная психология. Учебное пособие. -- Мн.: Высшая школа, 2004.- 288 с.

<sup>6</sup> Кризова психологія.: Навчальний посібник / За заг. ред. проф. О.В. Тімченка. – Х.: НУЦЗУ, КП «Міська друкарня», 2010. – 383 с.

order to catch a sensation and to raise their rating. This generates disbelief of people in their own possibilities, the power of the state, make people be neurotic. And all this happens in the situation when people need the sense of safety and assurance that he|she is not alone, that he|she will receive help.

- Today almost all known practice of rendering psychological help to an affected person begins when the person leaves the zone of emergency. In other words, when the environment stops to raise extreme demands to this person.

There is another (and very serious) problem that a person has after an emergency. This person has to readapt from extreme adaptation and integrate himself into life.

And here we have a moment. The social integration of a person who did not receive extreme psychological help in the center of an emergency can be blocked, slowed down. And any methods and forms of rendering psychological help, described in details in scientific works of psychoanalytical, humanistic and other paradigms of psychological science are not effective any more. Academic science starts to attribute a big part of the blame to the lack of the professionalism of a psychologist or an absence at a victim of positive set to the work with a psychologist.

But in reality the contrary is the case. Not giving of extreme psychological help in the center of an emergency leads, as a rule, to “mental numbness” or to “mental trauma negation” by a victim.

When a person is in a state of “mental numbness” his|her reactions are slow, deferred. One can notice the affective blockade of mental processes, temporary loss of working capacity and alienation from the society. The person seems to retire into himself|herself and watch everything from the distance (dissociation). In a state of “mental trauma negation” a person is not disposed (and sometimes does not agree) to explain the symptoms he|she has by a traumatic event. The person wants to strike out of his|her life all the events connected with that traumatic experience.

Thus, the main tasks that a psychologist should pay attention to during rendering urgent psychological help can be formulated as following:

- Keeping of an optimal level of the psychological and psychophysical state of a person (rendering help in case of acute stress reactions).
- Prevention of delayed negative reactions including the deliverance of a person from negative emotional states that appeared as a result of a traumatic event.
- Prevention and if necessary termination of the manifestation of strong emotional reactions including mass reactions.
- Consulting victims, their relatives, friends and people working in the conditions of the liquidation of the consequences of an emergency about the peculiarities of stress experience.
- Help to the specialists who take part in the liquidation of the consequences of an emergency.

The main principles of the rendering the urgent psychological help to the victims of emergencies are:<sup>7</sup>

- urgency
- proximity to the place the event occurred
- expectation that normal situation will be restored
- unity and simplicity of the psychological impact

Urgency means that the help to an affected person should be rendered as soon as possible: the more time passes from the trauma moment the more probable different chronic diseases are, including PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder).

The principle of proximity is that the help should be rendered in usual atmosphere and social environment and the negative consequences should be minimized. Expectation that normal situation will be restored: a person affected by a stress situation should be treated as a normal person not as a patient. One should maintain the faith that soon everything will be normal again.

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<sup>7</sup> Федунина Н.Ю. Модель экстренной психологической помощи: Научно-практические и прикладные аспекты деятельности Центра экстренной психологической помощи ИЭП МГППУ: Сборник статей / М.: Экон-информ, 2011. С. 21- 54

Unity of a psychological impact means that the source of this impact should be one person or the procedure of rendering help should be unified.

Simplicity of a psychological impact means that the victim should be taken away from the source of a trauma, should be given some food, rest, secure environment and the possibility of being listened to.

The service of urgent psychological help, in whole, performs the following basic functions:

- practical: direct rendering an urgent psychological help and if necessary urgent medical first aid to the population;
- coordinating: assurance of communication and interaction with specialized psychological services;

The situation of a psychologist work during an emergency differs from an ordinary therapeutic situation at least in following moments: <sup>8</sup>

- Work with groups. Often a psychologist has to work with a group of victims and these groups are not created artificially by the psychologist or psychotherapist according to specialties of the psychotherapeutic process. These groups were created by the life due to dramatic event.
- Victims are often in an acute affective state. Sometimes a psychologist has to work with people who still are under the effect of the traumatic event what is not usual for an ordinary psychotherapeutic work.
- Low social and educational level of many victims. Among the victims one can meet many people who would never come to a psychotherapist in consideration of their social and educational status.
- Diversity of the psychopathologies among the victims. The victims of violence often suffer, besides traumatic stress, from neuroses, psychoses, personality disorders, and a range of problems (and this is important to know for the professionals working with victims) created by the catastrophe or other traumatic situation, for example the lack of means of subsistence, the absence of work etc.

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<sup>8</sup> Кризова психологія.: Навчальний посібник / За заг. ред. проф. О.В. Тімченка. – Х.: НУЦЗУ, КП «Міська друкарня», 2010. – 383 с.

- Almost all patients have a sense of loss as often victims lose their relatives, beloved, friends, places for living, work etc. This has its impact to the nosological image of traumatic stress especially to a depressive component of the syndrome.
- The difference of posttraumatic psychopathology from neurotic pathology. We can state that psychopathological mechanism of traumatic stress considerably differs from pathological mechanisms of neurosis. Thus one should elaborate strategies for working with the cases with “pure” traumatic stress and cases where traumatic stress is combined with other pathogenic factors of inner and outer nature.

So, the aim and tasks of urgent psychological help include the prevention of acute panic reactions, psychogenic neuropsychic disorders; increasing of the adaptive possibilities of an individual; psychotherapy of the occurred border neuropsychic disorders. The urgent psychological help to the population should be based on the principle of the intervention to the superficial layer of the consciousness in other words on the work with symptoms and not with syndromes<sup>9</sup>.

The content and methods of the urgent psychological help significantly depend on the character of the emergency and its traumatic mental health effect. We also want to notice that the activity of an extreme psychologist determines the main principles of rendering of the urgent psychological help<sup>10</sup>. The activity of the psychologist in such situation is regulated by general principles for rendering psychological help. But these principles in extreme situation receive a certain peculiarity according to the conditions of rendering help.

*The principle of the defense of the interests of the client.* The peculiarity of this principle in extreme conditions is that in contrast to general conditions of activity, here there is no psychotherapeutic agreement with client that is the limits of the work with the problem are not discussed. It happens because the help is

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<sup>9</sup> Осухова Н.Г. Психологическая помощь в трудных и экстремальных ситуациях: Учебное пособие для студ. высш. учеб. заведений. 2-е изд., испр. М.: Академия, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Малкина-Пых И. Г. Психологическая помощь в кризисных ситуациях– М.: Изд-во Эксмо, 2005. – 960 с.

directed to an actual state of a client. But in spite of this the defense of the interests of the client is the leading principle of an extreme psychologist.

*The principle “don’t hurt”.* The peculiarity of conditions and circumstances of the rendering psychological help during an emergency gives us several conclusions from this principle. The most important result is a short term of rendering help that means that the help should be directed to correct the actual state of an affected person. In the same time the taken measures should be directed to the future life of the victim. It is not quite right to carry out psychological work with old, out-of-date problems of the client because such work should be prolonged and well planned.

*The principle of voluntariness.* In general situations the specialists occupy as a rule a passive position (he waits when the client come to him for help). Under the conditions of urgent psychological help this principle is transformed into special behavior – a specialist psychologist initiate such help, he is active but not obtrusive. Such position on the one hand allows providing the necessary help to people who are in special conditions and often cannot rightly evaluate their needs and on the other hand does not disturb the personal limits of a victim.

*The principle of the privacy.* When rendering urgent psychological help this principle keeps its currency, but privacy can be broken if the psychologist finds out that his client’s actions can be dangerous for this client or for the environment (for example if the psychologist finds out that his client want to suicide.)

*The principle of the professional motivation.* This principle can be used for all types of the psychological help. In extreme situation it becomes especially important because there is a big probability that other motivations, except professional one, can direct the specialist (the motivation of self-affirmation, of getting a social recognition etc.).

*The principle of the professional competence* assumes that the specialist who renders the help should be a rather qualified, have a corresponding education and specially trained for the work in emergencies. In general conditions of work the psychologist can recommend, if necessary, another specialist, but in extreme



conditions it is often impossible to find another specialist. That is why the professional duties of a psychologist should include such aspects as the preparation to the time of departure to an emergency, ability to quickly restore the high level of working capacity, using professional skills.

We will notice that the observance of these principles, to our mind, is absolutely essential. This is a kind of ethic code of a specialist psychologist during the work under the conditions of an emergency.

Thus, the special features, marked in the article allow to tell about the urgency of the extreme psychologists work at the center of an emergency and their rendering extreme psychological help to the population affected by the tragedy.