

Actions taken by the Critical Incident Team after the Tsunami Disaster in South Asia 2005

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When the Tsunami hit South Asia, it was reported that over 200 Hong Kong residents were missing in Phuket, Thailand. As a result, the Government sent a team of rescuers and health care professionals to assist the families of the missing and the bereaved. This included clinical psychologists who were sent over there to attend to the emotional trauma experienced by the victims and families and to provide support and debriefings to the official rescue team members.

At the same time, there were the non-government groups of relief volunteers from the local community who wanted to offer their volunteer services in Phuket. These included members of the non-government agencies like the Hong Kong Red Cross (HKRC), enthusiastic individuals who bought a ticket and flew there to see how they could help, and corporate groups such as tourist guides who had good knowledge of the city and the Thai language. There were also media reporters who visited the disaster sites and saw the gruesome scenes and damage of the Tsunami. The Critical Incident Team (CIT) of the Division of Clinical Psychology, Hong Kong Psychological Society, which has been a strategic response team providing voluntary community psychological support in major disasters since 1993 after the Lan Kwai Fong Incident, was immediately mobilized.

“Plan for disaster while you are safe” (居安思危) has governed the development and mission of the CIT. Since 2002, we have formed partnership with the HKRC and provided training for a group of HKRC’s first aiders who wanted to equip themselves with skills of psychological first aid so that they could provide the appropriate psychological support for victims or other emergency helpers in times of disaster. This marked the beginning of the Psychological Support Team (PST) comprising of volunteers in HKRC. The Tsunami disaster was probably the first major disaster that put the role and operations of the PST into test. Based on a needs assessment by the HKRC, a PST was sent to Phuket to offer on-site psychological support to victims, emergency helpers and media workers from Hong Kong. As a worldwide humanitarian service provider, the symbol of the Red Cross bore by the PST of HKRC has demonstrated to be very helpful in earning the trust of victims, volunteers and media workers from Hong Kong and bridging with the local Red Cross networks in Phuket.

Based on the previous experience of the CIT and later confirmed by the on-site

experience of the PST, the victims and families were well taken care of by the government rescue teams, while the most easily overlooked or hard to reach groups were the individual volunteers and reporters. According to the assessment of the HKRC's headquarters, on-site report of the PST, and experience of the CIT, the CIT seized the chance of providing psychological support for three niche groups: 1) volunteers, 2) reporters, & 3) members of the HKRC's PST who were sent to Phuket.

Psychological 'pre-briefing' and 'debriefing' were conducted for HKRC's volunteers in Hong Kong. Two on-site psychological debriefing sessions in Phuket were conducted for a group of community volunteers and a group of media workers. These psychological briefings were offered to homogenous groups of volunteers and media workers with reference to established models of psychological briefings for disaster workers (Dyregrov, 2003; Mitchell, 1996; Weisaeth, 2000) and the limitations of single-session debriefing for prevention of posttraumatic stress (Rose, Bisson, & Wessely, 2002). The psychological 'pre-briefing' for HKRC's volunteers was conducted in Hong Kong before they went to Phuket for their operations. The pre-briefing aimed at enhancing realistic expectations, effective communication between team members, and self-caring skills. The debriefings conducted in Phuket were conducted prior to the groups being discharged from duties. The debriefing for HKRC's volunteers were conducted after they were discharged from their operations and returned to Hong Kong. These debriefings focused on greater awareness of the psychological impact, facilitating mutual emotional support, positive coping, and empowering and reinforcing their continued zeal in their work. These psychological briefing sessions were culturally adapted and cautiously applied to emergency service providers, with a strong psychoeducational component and cognitive-behavioural coping elements (Leung & Wu, 2005). Participants also took the Chinese version of the Impact of Event Scale – Revised (IES-R: Wu & Chan, 2003, 2004) as a screening for symptoms and assessing their needs for follow-up. Based on the result of the IES-R, no significant psychological distress was found for all the participants of the debriefings. HKRC's volunteers who have attended multiple-session psychological briefings before and after the Tsunami operation in Phuket were follow-up 6 months after the disaster with the IES-R and open-ended questions exploring their experience in the disaster and the briefing sessions. No significant psychological distress was identified for the respondents. Respondents found the multiple-session psychological briefings helpful and were

ready to share their personal reflections of the Tsunami disaster. The partnership between HKRC and CIT in providing psychological support service for HKRC's volunteers and community helpers in the Tsunami disaster suggests the needs and benefits for developing psychological support service in organizations offering humanitarian and emergency service in Hong Kong.

The following is a chronicle capturing the actions taken by the CIT in response to this major disaster.

26 December 04 to 3 January 05

- ☞ Two press releases were issued. One on how the public can cope with the Tsunami news was prepared by Kitty Wu, Esther NG and Eugenie LEUNG. The other one on how rescuers and reporters can help themselves to cope with and work effectively with the Tsunami disaster relief work was prepared by Eddie LI and CP colleagues working in the Hong Kong Police Force. Please refer to DCP's website (<http://rouge.hkps.org.hk/dcp/>) for details.
- ☞ A pre-briefing was conducted for the Psychological Support Team (PST) of the Hong Kong Red Cross on 31 December 04 by Kitty WU, Eugenie LEUNG and Valda Cho, prior to the PST's trip to Phuket.

4 to 7 January 05

- ☞ After a needs assessment by the PST and CIT, Kitty WU and Eugenie LEUNG flew to Phuket on 5-7 January to conduct two psychological debriefing sessions for a group of volunteers and a group of media workers, and a site visit to the Patong Beach, the Trauma Therapy and Counselling Centre and Tsunami Coordination Centre at the Phuket City Hall area.

After 7 January 05

- ☞ Lau Yu Po-kwan and Valda Cho conducted a debriefing session for the PST on 14 January 05

after the PST has returned to Hong Kong from Phuket.

- ☞ CIT actively participated in the seminar “Tsunami Aftermath: Psychological Perspectives” jointly organized by the DCP and Hong Kong Red Cross on 29 January 05.

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