

Tragic Experiences/ Memories Affect Mental Health

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Immediate and Long-Term Services Are Always Needed

Recent earthquakes in Indonesia triggered fear of not only the earthquakes themselves and of a possible tsunami, but also memories of the 2004 tsunami. These experiences incited fears of a repeat disaster and led to many citizens feeling panicked as they searched for family members and were too scared to return to buildings even after the tremors subsided. This situation clearly illustrates the immediate and long-term effects of traumatic experiences, and the need for mental services as soon as possible when a catastrophe occurs, as well as long-term to address lingering effects.

The New Jersey Mental Health Institute, Inc. (NJMHI) and its parent company, the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc. (NJAMHAA), continually engage in various initiatives to build awareness and acceptance of mental illnesses, and the availability and value of services, as well as to reduce stigma. “We strive to help people around the corner and around the world to cope with experiences and illnesses that affect their mental health, and increase opportunities for them to seek and receive help when needed,” said Debra Wentz, Ph.D., Executive Director of NJMHI and Chief Executive Officer of NJAMHAA.

Since its inception in 1951, NJAMHAA has focused on representing community-based providers of behavioral healthcare services throughout the state. “While our advocacy, training programs and other services are designed directly for providers, our initiatives ultimately support current and future consumers of behavioral healthcare services who our members serve,” Dr. Wentz said.

In 2004, Dr. Wentz happened to be in Sri Lanka to attend a friend’s wedding and missed the tsunami waves by merely seconds. She immediately offered assistance on site and upon her return home, she rallied her network of diverse resources and launched the Mental Health Relief Project in Sri Lanka.

Through this initiative, volunteers provided culturally competent and culturally sensitive training in Sri Lanka in 2005 to health professionals, community and religious leaders, and other residents, enabling them to recognize the signs of mental illness and substance use disorder, take what action steps they could and refer individuals for professional help when needed. An estimate of 200,000 children and adults were positively impacted by this initiative. “We had planned to return in 2006 to provide more training. Unfortunately, however, at the time, the political unrest in the country prevented us from doing so,” Dr. Wentz said. She and her team

immediately started developing educational brochures in English, Tamil and Sinhali, which were distributed by NJMHI's contacts in Sri Lanka, to reinforce and supplement the training that was previously provided. "We continue to discuss the value and use of these materials and a future educational exchange with the Neurological Development Foundation, a nongovernmental organization in Sri Lanka that we worked with to launch the training program," Dr. Wentz said.

"NJAMHAA and NJMHI will persevere in our dedication to ensuring timely access to the highest quality, most appropriate and culturally competent and linguistically accessible services and supports for individuals throughout New Jersey, as well as the nation and the world," Dr. Wentz said. "Mental health is an integral part of overall health, and mental health disorders and addictions are very real and very treatable diseases. We will continue with our mission to ensure that individuals of all ages know these vital facts, seek help for themselves or loved ones when needed, and support providers who offer these critical, life-transforming services."