

APA Official Actions

Position Statement on Disaster Preparedness and Response for Older Americans

Approved by the Board of Trustees, December 2019

Approved by the Assembly, November 2019

“Policy documents are approved by the APA Assembly and Board of Trustees. . . These are . . . position statements that define APA official policy on specific subjects. . .” – *APA Operations Manual*

Issue:

The APA Council on Geriatric Psychiatry identifies older Americans as disproportionately affected and at increased risk of suffering or death in geoclimatic phenomena. For example, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has reported exposure maps of flood hazards showing that older persons tend to live near or in coastal flood-prone areas. When older people suffer or die in “natural disasters” such as earthquakes, wild fires, volcanic eruption, heat waves, torrential rains and mudslides, snow/ice storms, landfall of a hurricane or storm surge, the vast majority are harmed not by the elements but by failure of social, economic and political institutions. Older Americans can bring a resilience to the disaster environment that can only come with age and life experience. However, older people can also be particularly defenseless when access to food, medications, cash, and transportation may already be compromised. Many frail older people and those suffering from poor health, medical comorbidity, and/or mobility limitations are at greater risk of not receiving the care they need - which can lead to unnecessary suffering and death. Older adults may have preexisting psychiatric conditions of anxiety, depression and cognitive impairment. Isolated or under-supported older people or those with psychiatric symptoms may have exacerbations after a disaster event, such as sleeplessness, anxiety, decreased perception of safety, sadness and increases in substance use. Normal stress responses typically resolve within the first month. With resiliency-enhancing and evidence-based early interventions, such as problem-solving therapy to address basic needs, most people can move forward. Following a geoclimatic disaster, it is important to screen periodically for psychiatric disorders including substance use disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder. Those with cognitive impairment may not be able to negotiate evacuation or obtaining needed support from complex federal, state, and local relief efforts. With chronic stress, loss and disruption of social support networks, the increase in serious mental illness is reported to exceed 60% from baseline levels.

APA Position:

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) recognizes that older Americans’ health including mental health are disproportionately affected by disaster events. APA commits to support and collaborate with seniors, communities, nursing homes and other health care organizations in efforts to prevent and to mitigate the adverse health, including mental health effects of disasters on older adults.

References:

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