

COMPETENCIES REQUIRED IN THE PROVISION OF PSYCHOSOCIAL PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE IN THE CONTEXT OF PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

There continues to be significant gaps in the integration of the different professional and semi-professional groups in the psychosocial aftercare of people affected by disasters. Some of the reasons for this include professional mistrust and/or rivalry inside and amongst the multiple disciplines who would be involved as part of a psychosocial team; lack of clarity regarding competencies, lack of education and training, and legislative and planning issues that can affect the seamless coordination of the development and delivery of psychosocial services across governmental departments and levels of government. Differences across regions, provinces, and territories in the interpretation of what constitutes psychosocial services and associated standards of care further complicate the matter.

Disaster and emergency response systems function best when all aspects are coordinated, coherent, and consistent. Psychosocial support, therefore, despite or in the context of ongoing differences in interpretation and standards, is best envisioned at the local and regional level as a coordinated program of activities and interventions coordinated across systems and organizations. Further, it is clear from the broad range of services that fall under the rubric of psychosocial care, that this function will require a range of levels of skills, training, and expertise.

Globally various governmental, non-governmental and professional bodies are pursuing the standardization of disaster psychosocial (otherwise described as disaster mental health; disaster behavioral health) competencies for the planning, delivery, and evaluation of psychosocial care and support in the context of disasters and public health emergencies. This report outlines a series of relevant domains of competence, identifying core competencies, associated knowledge and skills, and suggested training, tools, and evaluation strategies.

Competence, Performance and Assessment

Competence can generally be understood as the ability to integrate and apply the knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values¹ required to practice effectively, safely and ethically in a designated role and practice setting. Competency-based models are based on observable performance or behavioral indicators and attitudes, traits, or personalities that are related to effective or superior performance in a specific role or job. In other words, competency models attempt to define what makes expert performers “experts.” The natural result of defining such indicators would be some sort of hierarchy of standards indicating satisfactory or minimal performance (i.e., competent), proficiency or above average performance (i.e., expert), and extraordinary performance (i.e., exemplary).

Competencies do not replace job descriptions nor can they be confused with performance assessment. They can be used to: (1) update and revise job descriptions; (2) orient existing and new employees to their disaster/emergency roles and responsibilities, (3) target training needs; (4) provide the basis for ongoing self-assessment by agencies and individuals as they evaluate their readiness to respond; and (5) provide a job- or role-relevant basis for performance appraisal dimensions or standards and review discussions.

Levels of Psychosocial Providers

Those providing psychosocial service range from minimally trained volunteers through a range of mental health professionals and disaster mental health experts. Similarly, psychosocial services

¹ Knowles, M. (1975). *Self-Directed Learning*. New York: Association Press.

Disaster Psychosocial Competencies Overview

range from the provision of a supportive presence to formal mental health assessment and the provision of formal mental health interventions. The following table provides a matrix aligning the various competency domains with levels of expertise and service provision. It is not intended to be proscriptive but to suggest a framework for considering how to incorporate the broad range of relevant knowledge and skills that can usefully be employed in the provision of psychosocial care and support.

Table 1 (Levels of Psychosocial Providers) defines four levels of engagement in psychosocial services. These are hierarchically ordered based on the levels of training and expertise required to meet the outlined competencies. These Levels do not, however, denote hierarchies of importance or valuing. All the services provided are valuable and psychosocial providers need to be able and willing to engage in a variety of responsibilities that may make use of only some of their competencies but should never exceed those competencies.

At **Level I**, a provider would be expected to be able to be a supportive presence with survivors and their families. Those meeting the required competencies for **Level II** would be able to be a supportive presence but would also have the skills and knowledge to engage in Psychological First Aid Strategies. Psychosocial providers in **Level III** would meet these aforementioned competencies, and to meet a range of competencies associated with other specific psychosocial interventions such as Critical Incident Stress Management, Crisis Intervention and Death Notification. Those tasked with the development, management, and evaluation of psychosocial programs, or **Level IV**, would be expected to meet all or most of the required competencies for the previous levels, and to have substantive clinical and supervisory or management experience, and preferably, experience working as a psychosocial provider in a disaster context. Finally, those developing and delivering training in psychosocial disaster response would meet the criteria for Level IV and, additionally, have experience and expertise in training.

Level	Roles	Recommended Competencies by Role
Level 1 Minimally trained volunteers	General supportive presence providing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contact and engagement • active listening • initial assessment of needs and referral to other levels of care 	Competency Domain #1 - 3
Level 2 Para-professionals and professional mental health workers without graduate degrees	Emotional support Psychological First Aid	Competency Domain #1 - #4
Level 3 Professional mental health workers with graduate degrees and preferably with relevant professional association accreditation	Emotional support Psychological First Aid Delivery of specific psychosocial interventions Worker-care Assessment and referral	Competency Domain #1 -11
Level 4 Professional mental health workers with management/ leadership training , relevant professional association accreditation, and previous disaster psychosocial response training and experience	Program development and coordination, Leadership, Evaluation, Supervision Education and Training	Competency Domain #1 -13

Table 1. Levels of Psychosocial Providers

Knowledge Domains and Psychosocial Competencies

The following matrices outline the competencies associated with disaster psychosocial support and care programming and its effective integration into the larger public health response to pandemic influenza and other public health emergencies and disasters. Each matrix outlines a specific knowledge domain and associated competencies, and where relevant, provides suggested minimal training expectations. More detailed descriptions of these competencies are provided in the Appendix 1 (Disaster Psychosocial Services Competency Matrices), which outline each knowledge domain and its associated competencies, detailing also the behavioral indicators of each competency and associated training expectations.

The first section, *General Competency Domains*, outlines the personal attributes and basic disaster management and disaster psychosocial service knowledge and skills that would be expected of all those working in the psychosocial function. The second section, *Disaster Mental Health Professional Competency Domains*, outlines general and specific knowledge and skills associated with the delivery of specific psychosocial interventions. An individual psychosocial responder may possess some or all of these competencies and it is expected that their roles and responsibilities would reflect these differences and the variation in needed services.

Throughout the psychosocial competency matrices, and where relevant, suggested training is outlined. As noted in the tables, the mere fact of having completed a specific training does not necessarily indicate competence and should not preclude performance evaluations (e.g., observation, interviews). The outlined competencies will ultimately need to be adapted to the specific structure and function of the relevant agency/organization, and the operational roles of specific individual workers (paid and volunteer).

Overview of Disaster Psychosocial Knowledge Domains

General Competency Domains

Domain #1 – Personal Attributes

Domain #2 – General Disaster and Emergency Psychosocial Preparedness

Disaster Mental/Behavioral Health Professional Competency Domains

Domain #3 – Supportive Presence

Domain #4 – Psychological First Aid

Domain #5 – Workforce Resiliency

Domain #6 – Critical Incident Stress Management

Domain #7 - Crisis and Suicide Intervention

Domain #8 – Community and Family Outreach

Domain #9 – Psychological Triage

Domain #10 – Multi-faith Spiritual Care

Domain #11 – Death Notification, Bereavement and Grief Support

Psychosocial Program Leadership and Coordination

Domain #12 – Consulting, Coordination, Program Development and Evaluation

Domain #13 – Disaster Psychosocial Education and Training

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Domain #1 - Personal Attributes	
Competencies	
1.	Demonstrates flexibility and adaptability and approaches change with a positive attitude
2.	Demonstrates empathy, respect, compassion and self-awareness
3.	Demonstrates active listening skills
4.	Works collaboratively within existing and emergent teams
5.	Demonstrates effective communication skills and contributes to the timely flow of accurate information
6.	Demonstrates a capacity to recognize, operate effectively within, and manage crisis and extreme stress
7.	Adopts a logical, systematic, and creative approach to solving problems
8.	Demonstrates professionalism, sound judgment and organizational awareness
9.	Adopts an ethical approach in all actions
10.	Demonstrates cultural competence and a valuing of diversity.

Domain #2 – General Disaster and Emergency Psychosocial Preparedness	
Competencies	
1.	Understands the disaster context and the psychosocial implications of disasters
2.	Understands the disaster management framework and context
3.	Adopts and promotes the value of personal, family and work-life preparedness and resilience
4.	Recognizes the function of disaster psychosocial services within emergency management
5.	Understands the disaster psychosocial support framework
6.	Adopts a resiliency and empowerment orientation to psychosocial response

Domain # 3– Supportive Presence	
Competencies	
1.	Understands the role of being a supportive presence
2.	Understands and is able to engage in the development of supportive relationships with affected individuals and families
3.	Understands and adheres to the scope of practice in this role, the limits of training and knowledge, and is able to assess the need for a more formal mental health intervention
4.	Understands and implements self-care

Domain # 4 – Psychological First Aid	
Competencies	
1.	Able to identify and discuss the impact of trauma, acute and long-term stress, and fear on individuals and groups
2.	Recognizes and understands the rationale and goals, 8 functions and their related methods and strategies, and the ethical and practice standards of the psychological first aid model
3.	Demonstrates the skills associated with the core PFA function: Safety and Comfort
4.	Demonstrates the skills associated with the core PFA function: Stabilization
5.	Demonstrates the skills associated with the core PFA function: Information Gathering
6.	Demonstrates the skills associated with the core PFA function: Practical Assistance
7.	Demonstrates the skills associated with the core PFA function: Connection with Social Supports
8.	Demonstrates the skills associated with the core PFA function: Information on Coping, Linkage with Collaborative Services
9.	Demonstrates the skills associated with the core PFA function: Linkage with Collaborative Services
10.	Understands and adheres to the scope of practice in this role, the limits of training and knowledge, and is able to assess the need for a more formal mental health intervention
11.	Understands and implements self-care

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Domain # 5 – Workforce Resiliency	
Competencies	
1.	Understands the theories and principles of a hierarchical needs approach
2.	Understands the theories and principles of stress management and demonstrate associated skills
3.	Understands and work effectively within organizational context
4.	Promotes self-help and mutual aid strategies
5.	Understands and has demonstrated competency in a repertoire of disaster psychosocial support and disaster mental health strategies
6.	Understands and adheres to the scope of practice in this role, the limits of training and knowledge, and is able to assess the need for a more formal mental health intervention
7.	Understands and implements self-care

Domain # 6 – Critical Incident Stress Management	
Competencies	
1.	Understands the theories and principles of Critical Incident Stress Management and the role of defusing and demobilization and demonstrates associated skills
2.	Understands the role of defusing and demobilization and demonstrates associated skills
3.	Understands the theories and principles of Critical Incident Stress Management and the role of psychological debriefing and demonstrates associated skills
4.	Understands the theories and principles of Crisis Management Briefings and demonstrates associated skills
5.	Understands and adheres to the scope of practice in this role, the limits of training and knowledge, and is able to assess the need for a more formal mental health intervention
6.	Understands and implements self-care

Domain # 7 – Crisis Intervention	
Competencies	
1.	Understands the theories and principles of crisis intervention and support and demonstrates associated skills
2.	Understands and applies the principles and strategies of suicide assessment and treatment planning
3.	Demonstrates knowledge of and skills in crisis intervention methods and strategies
4.	Demonstrates knowledge of and skills in crisis intervention methods and strategies using virtual communication methods (i.e., telephone crisis lines, web-based services)
5.	Understands and adheres to the scope of practice in this role, the limits of training and knowledge, and is able to assess the need for a more formal mental health intervention
6.	Understands and implements self-care

Domain # 8– Community and Family Outreach	
Competencies	
1.	Works from an understanding of the benefits and challenges of outreach work
2.	Demonstrates skill and comfort working in a community-based or outreach capacity
3.	Demonstrates knowledge and skills relevant to a range of disaster psychosocial topics and disaster related mental health issues
4.	Demonstrates ability to provide psych-educational sessions (individual & group) on key psychosocial topics
5.	Understands and adheres to the scope of practice in this role, the limits of training and knowledge, and is able to assess the need for a more formal mental health intervention
6.	Understands and implements self-care

Domain # 9- Psychological Triage	
Competencies	
1.	Understands and has expertise in knowledge domains relevant to Psychological Triage
2.	Demonstrates capacity to work with extreme emotions and skills in Psychological Triage
3.	Understands the scope of practice in this role, the limits of training and knowledge, and is able to assess the need for higher levels of support
4.	Understands and implements self-care

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Domain # 10- Multi-faith Spiritual Care	
Competencies	
1.	Understands, endorses and works from a multi-faith orientation
2.	Understands and is able to implement multi-faith interventions in a disaster context
3.	Understands and adheres to the scope of practice in this role, the limits of training and knowledge, and is able to assess the need for a more formal mental health intervention
4.	Understands and implements self-care

Domain # 11– Death Notification, Bereavement and Grief Support	
Competencies	
1.	Understands the procedures, standards and rights associated with death notification
2.	Implements death notification procedures with compassion, professionalism and respect for diversity
3.	Understands and differentiates between 'normal' (common) grieving and complicated or prolonged grieving processes
4.	Identifies and describes contextual, event –related and personal factors that may influence grief process and outcomes
5.	Supports, empowers, and provides information to grieving individuals and families
6.	Demonstrates knowledge, skills, and cultural sensitivity in grief & bereavement support group facilitation
7.	Understands and adheres to the scope of practice in this role, the limits of training and knowledge, and is able to assess the need for a more formal mental health intervention
8.	Understands and implements self-care

Domain # 12 - Disaster Psychosocial Organizational Consulting, Coordination, Program Development and Evaluation	
Competencies	
1.	Provides effective organizational consultation regarding disaster psychosocial services
2.	Understands and work effectively within organizational context
3.	Fosters the development of a common vision and a cooperative working environment
4.	Ensures the ongoing development, practicing, and updating of an effective psychosocial plan for major emergencies and disasters
5.	Demonstrates strategic planning & decision making skills
6.	Effectively coordinates services and service delivery within and amongst disaster psychosocial service partners
7.	Understands and implements effective program development and evaluation procedures and strategies
8.	Recognizes and employs effective intra- and inter- agency communication
9.	Understands and adheres to the scope of practice in this role, the limits of training and knowledge, and is able to assess the need for a more formal mental health intervention
10.	Understands, implements, and mentors self-care

Domain # 13- Disaster Psychosocial Education and Training	
Competencies	
1.	Possesses relevant background training, skills and experience
2.	Demonstrates expertise in requisite domains of knowledge and skills relevant to the delivery of disaster psychosocial services
3.	Demonstrates expertise in specific 'special topics' and interventions related to disaster psychosocial services
4.	Supports a flexible, empowering, and relevant learning environment
5.	Understands and adheres to the scope of practice in this role, the limits of training and knowledge, and is able to assess the need for a more formal mental health intervention
6.	Understands, implements, and mentors self-care