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Emotional distress and coping following the 2015 major earthquake in Sabah, Malaysia

Rafidah Bahari, Mohamed Ikram Mohamed Salleh, Muhammad Najib Mohamad Alwi, Muhammad Ihsan Tusirin, Amalina Syaifiqah Zakaria, Nurul Fatin Ismail, Arifah Abd Rahman and Mohd Hasif Mohd Ramlee
Cyberjaya University College of Medical Sciences, Malaysia

Introduction: In June 2015, an earthquake shook the quiet district of Ranau in Sabah, Malaysia. Measuring 6.0 in magnitude, it was the worst to affect the area since 1976. Major natural disaster does not only result in destruction and physical injuries. Psychological consequences are frequent but are seldom recognized. Left unchecked, they can result in disabling mental and physical conditions.

Objective: The aim of this study is to explore the emotional impact of the earthquake on the residents of Ranau and the coping strategies used to deal with the emotional distress.

Methods: This study was conducted during humanitarian missions to villages in Ranau between August and November 2015. Convenient sampling was done which included residents present during the earthquake and aged at least 18. This study uses a qualitative exploration design. Subjects gave written consent to participate and were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview schedule.

Results: A total of 119 subjects were interviewed. All subjects admitted to having emotional distress especially immediately in the aftermath of the major earthquake. The most common emotional sequel was fear, followed by shock and worry. For most, the distress lasted about 2 weeks. Subjects used a variety of psychological, social and religious coping techniques to manage their emotional distress. Many quoted acceptance, prayers, talking about the event and good social support as the most beneficial methods for handling their distress. Very few have received counseling for their symptom.

Conclusion: Emotional distress is extremely common in the residents of Ranau following the big earthquake in 2015. Fortunately for the majority, symptoms were self-limiting. Nevertheless, further studies are needed to explore the long term impact of such an event in this population.

References:

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Biography

Rafidah Bahari has obtained her Medical degree from the Queen's University of Belfast and Membership of the Royal Colleges of Psychiatrist from the Royal College of Psychiatrist in London. She is currently pursuing her PhD from Cyberjaya University College of Medical Sciences, Malaysia, in developing a novel faith based intervention for PTSD. Her research interests include PTSD, spiritual and religious interventions, validation, systematic reviews and qualitative studies.

rafidahbahari@cybermed.edu.my

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