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The Role of Social Work in Times of Crises and Disasters

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Abstract ;

The rapid pace of social change in contemporary societies, along with the accompanying psychological and social challenges, and the increasing incidence of crises and disasters previously unfamiliar to these communities, have necessitated the development of specialized psychological and social programs and services by professionals in the fields of social work and psychosocial care. These interventions are designed to assist individuals in effectively confronting and managing such challenges through evidence-based, professional approaches.

The prompt and direct provision of these services to those affected is a critical necessity during crises and disasters, as it plays a pivotal role in preventing the escalation of problems, mitigating their negative impacts on both individuals and society, and promoting overall resilience. These societal transformations have been paralleled by advancements in the human sciences, aimed at deepening the understanding of human behavior and enhancing the capacity to support individuals in overcoming adversity.

Consequently, innovative methods and models have emerged to address the psychological and social ramifications of crises and disasters. Among the most prominent is crisis and disaster intervention within the framework of social work practice. As social work has evolved—through its three primary modalities: casework, group work, and community organization—to support individuals, groups, and communities in resolving problems and overcoming functional obstacles, new and complex challenges have surfaced, prompting the need for specialized intervention strategies.

Crisis intervention in social work represents a contemporary methodological approach within the profession. It is specifically employed to deliver timely and targeted psychosocial support to individuals experiencing acute psychological distress due to sudden, disruptive events, thereby enabling them to regain stability and cope with their circumstances in a constructive and adaptive manner.

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Definition of Crisis:

A crisis is a temporary state of disturbance and imbalance, often characterized by an individual's inability to cope with a specific situation using customary problem-solving methods. It carries the potential for either a positive or negative outcome. A person experiencing a crisis typically goes through an incident marked by chance, risk, or a life-threatening event. In such a state, the individual becomes highly sensitive to the incident and fails to manage or mitigate the pressures using familiar coping mechanisms, which ultimately leads to a state of disequilibrium (Al-Deeb, 1418 AH).

A crisis is defined as an impact that challenges an individual's strength and willpower, compelling or forcing them to change their behavior in order to readapt to themselves, their surrounding environment, or both (Al-Qarni, 1420 AH).

Al-Khudairi (2003) described a crisis as a serious threat that may undermine the goals, values, beliefs, and assets of individuals, organizations, or states, whether the threat is expected or unexpected. He further emphasized that a crisis constitutes a critical and decisive moment that concerns the fate of the affected administrative entity, creating a profound difficulty for decision-makers and placing them in a state of considerable confusion.

A crisis is a disruption that materially affects the entire system and its legitimacy, potentially leading to its termination or cessation of functioning. It also significantly impacts the lives of individuals working within the system, spreading fear and panic among them, leading to a loss of internal cohesion and trust in the system (Al-Sanhouri, 1997).

It is a sudden dysfunction resulting from unstable conditions that lead to unexpected developments due to the inability of the involved parties to contain it (Othman, 1991).

A crisis is also described as a state of tension and a turning point that requires a decision, resulting in new outcomes—whether negative or positive—that affect various related entities (Al-Shaalan, 2002).

Definition of disaster:

According to the United Nations, a disaster is a devastating situation that abruptly disrupts daily life patterns, leaving people without assistance and suffering from its consequences. In such circumstances, individuals become in urgent need of protection, clothing, shelter, medical and social care, as well as other essential necessities of life.

(UN. United Nations Secretariat for the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, International Strategy Terminology for Disaster Reduction)

Hawash (2005) defines a disaster as one of the concepts closely associated with crises. While a disaster may result in a crisis, it is not, in itself, a crisis. Rather, it represents an actual destructive event that has occurred, resulting in damage to material assets, intangible elements, or both.

The International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) Conference

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defined a disaster as an event that results in significant loss of life and property, as well as environmental pollution. Such an event may be natural or human-induced, whether intentional or unintentional. Responding to a disaster requires the efforts of the state, or regional and international support, depending on the scale of the disaster and the extent of the resulting losses (Al-Fiqi, 2000).

The International Civil Defence Organization (ICDO) defines a disaster as a major incident resulting in significant loss of life and property. It may be natural—caused by natural phenomena—or man-made, resulting from human actions, whether intentional or unintentional. Addressing such a disaster requires the support of the national government, or international assistance if the scope of the disaster exceeds national response capacities (Shapiro, 2003).

Definition of social work:

Social work is defined as a form of community-based practice primarily aimed at providing assistance to individuals, local communities, and various groups. It seeks to promote an adequate level of individual and societal well-being, helps individuals gain better self-understanding, and fosters their integration into the society in which they live. This is achieved through the development of their abilities and skills, and by striving to maximize the benefits derived from available resources (Autes, 2001).

Social work is also defined as a set of activities carried out by social workers or other professionals to help individuals become self-reliant, prevent dependency on others, strengthen family bonds, and improve their social functioning (Al-Dukhail, 2006).

Social work is also defined as an activity aimed at helping individuals and their social environment adapt to one another. This goal is achieved through the use of techniques and methods designed to empower individuals, groups, and communities to address their needs and to resolve problems of adaptation in a changing society, through collaborative efforts to improve economic and social conditions (Dauphin, 2014).

The aforementioned definitions indicate that social work, with its diverse procedures, practices, and mechanisms, is essentially an organized effort to assist individuals in reintegrating after experiencing a crisis, social event, or disaster. Social work is not merely institutional or non-institutional assistance; rather, it is a developmental humanitarian endeavor. To fully understand this effort, it is essential to present the various levels of social work within society.

Secondly: The Role of Social Work in Times of Crises and Disasters

Social work responds to crises and disasters with immediate interventions aimed at restoring societal balance and addressing the problems and consequences that arise in the aftermath. The role of social work during such times can be outlined as follows (Oweidah, 2014):

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1. Professional Preparation:

Social work practice in the context of disasters cannot be left to trial and error, as even minor mistakes may lead to further, irreparable consequences. Therefore, one of the fundamental responsibilities of social work is the pre-organization of disaster-related tasks and the professional preparation of disaster specialists through the following steps:

Careful selection of qualified personnel capable of dealing with disaster risks, possessing the following attributes:

The ability to make quick decisions.

Accurate perception and situational awareness.

Comprehensive knowledge of available service resources and how to utilize them.

A clear understanding of the different types of disasters and their respective impacts.

Emotional and psychological resilience.

Scientific and skills-based preparation appropriate for various rescue operations and for managing the psychological collapse often associated with disasters.

Division of rescue efforts into integrated, manageable phases.

Conducting scientific research on the outcomes of past disasters to identify data that can guide future social work efforts, taking into account variations in time and location.

2. Professional Intervention

Professional intervention during various types of disasters is characterized by features that differ from the traditional characteristics of social work practice, whether in the context of its three primary methods (casework, group work, and community organization) or in its specialized fields such as school, medical, or psychological social work. It represents a pattern of practical and therapeutic operations and procedures carried out within a comprehensive framework. In order for professional intervention to be effectively implemented as planned, the assistance processes provided by social work are categorized as follows (Messick, 1997):

Preventive Measures:

Raising individuals awareness in advance about the risks of disasters and the necessary procedures to avoid their consequences in the future—particularly in schools and public spaces.

Participating in public information campaigns aimed at educating about disaster risks.

Conducting internal drills within institutions to train individuals on appropriate responses during disasters, identify errors, address them, and evaluate overall preparedness.

Selecting past or current global or local disasters as topics for educational seminars within schools or social institutions, with a focus on explaining their causes, effects, and the efforts made to confront them—assessing those efforts positively or negatively.

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Therapeutic Measures:

Providing immediate essential material aid to victims and those affected.

Referring affected individuals promptly to the appropriate specialized agencies and institutions.

Identifying victims, confirming their identities and places of residence, and notifying their families.

Organizing temporary shelter and accommodation for disaster victims.

Alerting the public to potential risks associated with disasters.

Prioritizing rescue operations for women, children, and the elderly.

Objectives of Social Work Intervention in Responding to Crises and Disasters

The objectives of social work intervention in managing crises and disasters can be broadly categorized into two main goals (Gaberan, 2017):

a) Immediate (Short-term) Goal:

This goal focuses on helping the individual affected by the disaster or crisis (the client) reach a point where they regain self-confidence, the ability to think rationally, and to respond appropriately to the situation. It also involves removing any immediate threats or satisfying urgent needs—those which, if left unmet, could endanger the client's life or psychological balance. In essence, the objective is to make the situation more tolerable and to transform the crisis or disaster into a manageable problem.

b) Ultimate (Long-term) Goal:

Social work aims to achieve this goal once the client has regained a certain level of equilibrium as a result of meeting the immediate goal. At this stage, the intensity of the crisis diminishes, the situation becomes more bearable, the threats to the client's life subside, negative emotions weaken, and the client becomes more competent in handling the situation. The social worker then works toward the final objective of the intervention, which varies from case to case depending on the nature of the crisis, the stage of the client's psychological development, and the available environmental resources.

In conclusion, social work intervention in times of crises and disasters takes into account both methodological and practical considerations. It serves as a mediator between service resources and affected individuals, relying on the principle of rapid response. Moreover, the intervention emphasizes a team-based approach, working within an integrated, multidisciplinary framework during emergencies.

3. The Role of the Social Worker in Responding to Crises and Disasters

Social workers play a crucial role in efforts to restore balance to society and individuals in the aftermath of a crisis or disaster. Their contributions are manifested through clearly defined roles that involve providing various forms of support, assistance, and psychosocial backing to affected members of the community. These

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roles help individuals cope with the situation and ensure the provision of ongoing services characterized by rapid response and a strong commitment to alleviating the adverse conditions brought about by the crisis or disaster.

Crises and disasters require social workers to adopt non-traditional methods of intervention, as outlined by Othman (1997):

Prompt response at the onset of a crisis or disaster.

Arriving at the disaster site as part of a multidisciplinary team to address the crisis from all angles.

Participating in a rapid yet thorough assessment of the crisis's effects.

Preparing a comprehensive report detailing the extent of losses experienced by those affected.

Swiftly developing a plan to address the aftermath of the crisis.

Involving clients in the process, in line with the principle of combating passivity and dependency, thereby fostering a sense of agency and engagement in crisis management.

Maintaining frequent contact and meetings with clients, which reinforces the social worker's presence and responsiveness to their needs, while strengthening their ability to address emerging challenges.

Approaching intervention with decisiveness, inclusiveness, and participation, ensuring the rapid delivery of services in coordination with relevant stakeholders and through active

Steps of Social Work Intervention According to Crisis and Disaster Intervention Theory

Morley has identified specific steps for intervention during crises and disasters, which are summarized as follows (Morrice, 2009):

Assessment of the individual and the nature of the problem.

Development of a therapeutic intervention plan.

Implementation of the intervention and execution of the plan.

Kaplan, on the other hand, emphasizes that due to the psychological reactions tied to the crisis situation and the individual's perceived responsibility for it, effective therapeutic intervention requires active collaboration and participation between both the practitioner and the client (i.e., the person affected by the crisis or disaster). In some cases, the social worker's role extends beyond providing counseling and guidance to include direct intervention with the individual and others impacted by the crisis.

Based on this perspective, Kaplan outlines the essential steps of crisis and disaster intervention as follows (Golam, 1998):

Establishing a professional relationship with the affected individual.

Reviewing the sequence of events and contributing factors that led to the crisis.

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Understanding the maladaptive responses previously used by the individual to cope with the crisis.

Teaching new adaptive strategies and coping mechanisms to deal with the crisis or disaster.

Mitigating the development of crisis-related symptoms.

Educating the individual on how to avoid high-risk situations that may lead to future crises.

Concluding the intervention process once the problem is resolved, ensuring that the individual understands both the causes of the crisis and the steps that led to its resolution.

Additionally, Zidan suggests that crisis and disaster intervention follows a series of key stages (Al-Siddiqi, 2012):

- Assessment.
- Planning the therapeutic intervention.
- Implementation of the therapeutic intervention.
- Crisis resolution.

It can be stated that the intervention of the social worker during times of crisis and disaster is directed toward three fundamental dimensions:

a) Cognitive Dimension:

This involves the provision of information, clarification, and explanation of the situation or problem, as well as guidance on how to deal with it effectively.

b) Emotional-Affective Dimension:

This dimension allows the client or their family the opportunity to express the emotions and feelings associated with the situation. It also involves providing appropriate responses and working to alleviate the emotional impact of the crisis on them.

c) Social Dimension:

This dimension focuses on the mobilization and provision of all available social services and community programs that may contribute to alleviating the crisis or solving the problem.

4. Crisis Intervention Theory

Crisis Intervention Theory is considered one of the contemporary approaches in the field of social work. It emerged as a result of the discipline's development of new therapeutic methods to address the challenges, crises, and difficulties faced by both individuals and communities.

The theoretical foundations of crisis intervention draw upon several key disciplines, including psychoanalytic theory, ego psychology, military psychiatry, preventive and public health models, and public health approaches. The roots of this theory can be traced back to prominent figures in psychology such as Heinz Hartmann, Abraham Maslow, Erik Erikson, and Jean Piaget.

The individual casework method began engaging with crisis situations in 1981,

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particularly through the work of Bertha Reynolds. Among the most influential contributors to this theory is Erik Erikson, an anthropologist and psychoanalyst, who conceptualized the human experience as a series of psychosocial crises he termed "life crises" or "identity crises."

Erikson proposed eight developmental stages across the human lifespan, asserting that each stage presents the individual with a unique challenge involving a conflict between two opposing forces. Successfully resolving the conflict results in the individual achieving a dynamic balance and gaining the strength to progress to the next developmental stage. According to Erikson, each life stage activates specific identity components that remain dormant until triggered by significant life events. These crises offer opportunities to re-evaluate past unresolved issues and integrate new insights.

Importantly, Erikson noted that unresolved crises from earlier stages may reappear in subsequent identity crises, offering renewed chances for resolution. He viewed life crises as periods of both hope and challenge, alongside moments of turmoil and anxiety. Each stage involves problems to be addressed, tasks to be completed, and the discovery of new possibilities. All of these elements contribute to the enrichment and development of personal identity (Depenne, 2016).

The practical applications of Crisis Intervention Theory gradually expanded beyond the psychological domain to encompass broader fields. The theory evolved to include studies related to housing, groups, and communities affected by disasters and crises. The concept of crisis intervention emerged as a response to the needs of groups undergoing sudden and dramatic transitions from one life situation to another.

Role Theory has also held a significant place within Crisis Theory, particularly in analyzing family roles. Numerous studies have explored how family life is altered under the impact of crisis situations. Since concepts related to family structure, interaction patterns, and functional performance are directly linked to addressing the family unit in crisis, they are considered vital in this context.

Impaired role functioning is often a direct outcome of crisis situations. Furthermore, the concept of role transition and the sequential changes in social roles throughout the life course represent important stressors that may accelerate the onset of crises for individuals and families. In this regard, Crisis Theory has benefited from Role Theory by integrating its concepts and applying them in practice.

Basic Assumptions of Crisis Intervention Theory

There are specific foundational assumptions that define the core framework of the crisis intervention approach, which can be summarized as follows (De Robertis, 2016):

Human beings are continuously exposed to increasing internal and external pressures throughout their ordinary lives, which may disturb their usual state of equilibrium with their surrounding environment. Such periods typically begin with an accidental or risky event—possibly a tragic or

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unfortunate incident—that has a cumulative impact on the individual.

The impact of a threatening situation disrupts the individual's balance, placing them in a state marked by increasing anxiety and tension. In an attempt to restore equilibrium, the individual goes through a series of predictable stages: initially relying on familiar coping mechanisms. If these prove ineffective, anxiety increases, prompting the individual to resort to emergency strategies never used before. If the problem persists and remains unresolved or unmanageable, tension continues to escalate until it reaches its peak.

At this critical point, a sudden factor may arise that prompts the individual to attempt self-directed coping. This phase is typically short-lived and is followed by an active crisis phase characterized by disorganization and imbalance. Over time, a gradual phase of reorganization may occur, leading the individual toward a new state of equilibrium.

As the crisis develops, the individual may begin to perceive the stressors as threats to their fundamental needs. When the person senses loss, a survival-oriented drive emerges, fueling a strong challenge to regain control.

These sensory perceptions elicit an emotional reaction, which reflects the individual's subjective meaning of the incident as a threatening event. This generates heightened anxiety, feelings of loss, sadness, grief, and deprivation, while simultaneously stimulating a sense of challenge, hope, and a release of new energy aimed at resolving the issue.

Although a crisis is not considered an illness or pathological condition, it represents a real conflict in addressing a current life situation. Crisis intervention in such cases may offer multiple opportunities to resolve the present difficulty effectively.

Each type of crisis situation evokes emotional reactions and behavioral responses corresponding to different stages of the crisis, which are often predictable. Through this process, the individual may come to recognize the underlying reasons behind their inability to cope, potentially offering a key to resolving the dilemma.

During crisis resolution, the individual often becomes more open to seeking help. Their habitual motivational mechanisms weaken, and typical coping strategies may no longer suffice. The individual's self-concept becomes more open to external influence and change. As a result, even minimal, well-targeted assistance at this stage can yield significant effects, often surpassing the impact of prolonged support offered in earlier phases.

In the reintegration phase, new aspects of the individual's self begin to emerge, and adaptive patterns develop, allowing for more effective coping with future challenges. However, if adequate support is not available during the critical period, patterns of maladjustment may surface, leading to reduced functional capacity in the future.

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Steps of Crisis Intervention

Although various perspectives exist on defining the steps of crisis intervention, a general consensus outlines four primary stages: assessment, planning, intervention, and termination, as follows (Al-Shaalan, 2002):

Step One: Crisis Assessment

Crisis intervention requires an initial assessment of the emotions and reactions of the system (the client or affected party) undergoing the crisis. This includes evaluating the degree of impairment or distress caused by the situation and establishing a professional relationship with the system.

Step Two: Planning the Intervention

In this stage, the generalist social work practitioner identifies the extent to which the crisis has impacted the system's functioning, evaluates the system's internal capacities for managing the crisis, explores potential links with other systems for coordinated action, determines available sources of support, and clearly defines the goals of the intervention.

Step Three: Intervention and Implementation of the Plan

This phase involves assisting the system in achieving a comprehensive understanding of the crisis situation, recognizing its strengths and weaknesses, and initiating appropriate action to address and manage the crisis effectively.

Step Four: Termination Phase

This final stage is marked by the achievement of the intended intervention goals or when the system begins to demonstrate an ability to manage and respond to the crisis independently.

Therapeutic Techniques According to Crisis Intervention Theory

The techniques employed by social workers during crisis intervention can be classified into three main categories: stress-reduction techniques, self-support techniques, and techniques for utilizing environmental resources (Ahmed, 2007), as follows:

1. Techniques for Reducing Emotional Stress

These aim to alleviate emotional pressures experienced by the system (client), such as anxiety and fear, using methods such as:

Emotional ventilation to reduce the intensity of anxiety.

Establishing contact that helps the individual feel valued and deserving of assistance.

Providing reassurance and hope, while not denying the seriousness of the situation.

2. Self-Support Techniques in Crisis Management

These focus on enhancing the individual's understanding of the situation and boosting self-efficacy to cope with the crisis through strategies such as:

Education and explanation to clarify the situation and provide necessary information for understanding the

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dimensions of the crisis, and identifying other systems that may assist.

Acceptance of reality, avoiding the tendency to blame others for the crisis.

Direct influence, wherein the practitioner shares their perspective on how to face the crisis, using methods such as suggestion, advice, and gentle pressure.

Guidance to help formulate future expectations.

Encouraging openness to the social environment.

3. Techniques for Utilizing Environmental Resources

This involves mobilizing the capacities of other systems within the environment beyond the immediate client system, including:

Material and human resources available within institutions.

Collaboration with other professionals.

Leveraging the capacities of all systems involved (individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, etc.).

Criticisms of Crisis Theory

Despite the strengths of Crisis Theory—particularly its optimistic view of the individual and its emphasis on the potential for unlimited growth and development when facing crises—it has faced a number of methodological and practical criticisms, similar to other theoretical frameworks. The main criticisms include:

Ambiguity in defining a crisis: One of the key challenges is the lack of clear criteria to distinguish between a crisis and a routine problem. That is, what may seem like a mere problem to one client might be perceived as a catastrophic event by another, and vice versa.

Criticism of the contract-based intervention model: The idea of a "contract" between social worker and client has been criticized for giving a misleading impression of equality in the relationship, while in practice, social workers often hold greater authority and decision-making power.

Lack of theoretical originality: This approach is viewed by some scholars as not genuinely innovative, being instead an eclectic mix of elements from other theories such as structural functionalism, behaviorism, self-concept theory, and role theory. This fusion results in a theoretical model that lacks a distinct or independent conceptual framework.

Symptomatic treatment rather than root-cause resolution: Crisis theory is also critiqued for its focus on managing symptoms rather than addressing the underlying causes of the crisis. As a result, the intervention may only offer partial or temporary relief, rather than providing a comprehensive and long-term solution.

Conclusion

Social work is considered one of the fundamental pillars in responding to disasters and crises, as it provides immediate and effective intervention to restore societal balance and mitigate the

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negative repercussions resulting from such emergencies. Social workers play a central role in this context through the implementation of professional tasks that involve offering psychological, social, and material support to affected individuals, as well as delivering urgent services around the clock characterized by efficiency, speed, and preparedness. This intervention occurs within a framework of collaboration and close coordination with relevant institutions and agencies.

Through scientifically and organizationally grounded professional intervention, social work emerges as an integrated system capable of effectively managing crises through carefully designed programs and administrative procedures that contribute to the provision of immediate assistance. Social institutions also prioritize organizing field training and workshops that enable professionals to engage positively with disasters, in addition to hosting seminars that explore global experiences in crisis management—enriching professional practice.

Thus, social work constitutes a unifying force in addressing disasters and crises with a scientific and humanitarian approach marked by flexibility and professionalism. It enhances the community's ability to recover and rebuild, going beyond mere reaction to the event. It transforms the impacts of crises into opportunities for learning and development, enabling individuals and communities to adapt effectively to future challenges.

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