

# PROVIDING PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

## ⌘ Guidance Note for European National Societies

Prepared by Europe Zone Office in collaboration with IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support

Since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, millions of Europeans have fallen below the poverty line and are struggling to make ends meet. What was perceived to be a temporary phenomenon has now taken root in countries and communities, and the number of people at risk of poverty has reached 120 million.

Many National Red Cross Red Crescent Societies have increased their domestic social activities in response to the increasing number of people in need – of everything from food aid to job training to psychosocial support. Whether in social centres, branch offices or during visits to families, psychosocial support is often an integrated part of other programmes provided by Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers to people affected by the crisis.



Image courtesy of Albert Nicomedes



**Europe  
in Crisis**  
think differently.



International Federation  
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies



## ⌘ Guidelines for Psychosocial Support after Economic Crisis

A number of European National Societies have provided psychosocial support to people affected by the crisis – from Iceland, where the crisis first struck, to Cyprus, which was hit five years later, in early 2013. Several of the National Societies have presented their activities at psychosocial conferences and have made their presentations available in the ENPS section of the Austrian Red Cross website, linked here: <http://bit.ly/1hzDp8E>

“Think Differently,” an International Federation report published in October 2013, about the humanitarian consequences of the crisis, draws attention to the fact that after years of sustained low suicide rates, suicide, attempted suicide and mental health problems are again on the rise.

Written in connection with this report, these guidelines are intended to provide information about standard reactions to crisis and how best to deal with them, and can be applied to crises anywhere in the world. Included also is a list of resources for accessing further information.

## ⌘ Normal reactions to abnormal situations

Losing your job, losing your home, realising that you are no longer able to provide for yourself or your family, and having to ask for help. This is the desperate situation in which many Europeans have found themselves in recent years, and we have come to realise that it could happen to any of us.

Society’s poorest, as “Think Differently” points out, have been hard hit by the crisis, sinking further into desolation with little hope of pulling through. At the same time, middle class families have faced enormous challenges making ends meet and returning to their position in mainstream society. Loss of employment was not the only factor – students and people with jobs have also been affected and unable to pay their bills, as prices for food, rent, transportation and all else, rise faster than salaries or grants.

Whether it happens suddenly or is a more gradual process, the situation is dire and distressing. Though each individual will react in a different way, it is good for staff and volunteers to be aware of common reactions to extreme stress when working with beneficiaries.

Although children, single parents and the elderly are often identified as the most vulnerable, it is important to be aware that other groups can also be vulnerable. Traditional breadwinners, for example, middle-aged men and women, may suffer from loss of pride and a feeling of uselessness, if they are suddenly no longer valued in the workplace. There is also extreme stress associated with no longer being able to provide for one’s family. Young people may also be afflicted with depression or loss of hope for the future, if prospects are bleak for entering the job market after completing their education. Some studies have shown that special attention must be paid to children in economic crises, as they will often blame themselves for their family’s hardship, or when their parents have had to give up something for their children’s sake.

### ⌘ Common reactions to extreme stress:

- Anxiety
- Constant watchfulness
- Startled responses
- Poor concentration
- Re-experiencing the event
- Guilt
- Sadness
- Anger
- Emotional numbness
- Withdrawal
- Disappointment
- Mental avoidance
- Behavioural avoidance.

## ⌘ Planning or revising psychosocial support

Psychosocial support can and often should be integrated into other programmes. Some National Societies, however, also offer effective psychosocial activities in Red Cross and Red Crescent social centres.

To enable staff and volunteers to provide the best support, it is advisable to provide them with some training, such as in psychological first aid and lay counselling. This will also make it possible for them to identify more severe cases that may need to be referred to a professional, for example, if an individual shows signs of being suicidal.

When integrating psychosocial support into other programmes or creating stand-alone activities, consider building them around these five pillars:

### Safety

Being in actual danger or the feeling of not being safe is very distressing. In the context of economic crisis, lack of safety can relate to losing one's home, not having a place to sleep, not being able to get adequate medical care, or not being able to provide for one's family. Suggested activities for fostering a feeling of safety include:

- Psychological first aid
- Lay counselling
- Referral to mental health professionals if needed
- Providing shelter and other basic necessities
- Support to pregnant women and small children to promote and maintain good nutrition and healthy lifestyle.

As an example, some National Societies are helping with the provision of shelter, distributing relief, and supporting people with below-standard living conditions by talking to them, as well as by providing meals to children before, during, or after school hours.

### Calming

Stressful or dangerous situations can trigger reactions in people which may actually increase their distress. Even though they are perfectly normal, reactions such as anxiety, anger, sleeplessness, etc. may be perceived by the individual as a sign that they are "losing it," going mad, or are no longer able to cope. Calming people down and helping them recognize these reactions as natural and normal is an important step in psychosocial support. Suggested activities for fostering a sense of calm include:

- Psycho-education (teaching about normal reactions to crisis and advising on how to cope)
- Psychological first aid
- Sharing of information
- Recreational activities such as playing games, handicrafts, physical exercise
- Stress-relieving exercises such as yoga, meditation, mindfulness, etc.

## ⌘ Different ways of coping

Just as we react to crisis in different ways, we also have different ways of coping with new life situations. Some people may demonstrate what can be termed as negative or even harmful ways of coping, which can include:

- Self-medication
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Sustained avoidance, including denial, seeking excessive distraction, refusing to talk about the crisis, inability to face reality
- Social isolation
- Chronic depression
- Aggressive behaviour

It is important to note, however, that when given the necessary support, most people will find they have the strength and resources to adapt to new life situations. Assistance from Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers can help generate more positive coping mechanisms. These include:

- Admitting that something distressing is happening and that the present situation is difficult
- Finding a good balance between feelings, thoughts and knowledge about the situation
- Maintaining a connection to family, friends and others
- Seeking actively to solve problems or better one's situation.

## ⌘ Taking care of staff and volunteers

Assisting people affected by crisis can at times be very stressful for staff and volunteers as well, whether beneficiaries are neighbours, friends or complete strangers. Remember to take good care of your staff and volunteers by ensuring they have the necessary knowledge, support and appreciation, as well as time-off, to enable them to be as effective as possible. You will find a multitude of useful tools in *Caring for Volunteers – A psychosocial support toolkit*, available on the PS Centre website.

## ⌘ Suggested resources

*Community-based Psychosocial Support Training Kit*, by the International Federation Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support. Read more on <http://www.pscentre.org/library/>

*Caring for Volunteers – A psychosocial support toolkit*, by the International Federation Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support: <http://www.pscentre.org/library/>

*Lay counselling – A trainer's manual*, by the International Federation Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support: <http://www.pscentre.org/library/>

Think Differently – Humanitarian impacts of economic crisis in Europe, report, by the International Federation: <http://bit.ly/15ssl05>

In a Better World – a film, by the International Federation: <http://bit.ly/19V9w9r>

Impact of economic crises on mental health, report, by the World Health Organization, Regional Office for Europe: <http://bit.ly/dYXUOJ>

## Self- and collective efficacy

The term efficacy refers to a person's or a community's ability or capacity to produce the results they want. Being able to influence one's own situation is very important for well-being. Sudden unemployment or the loss of housing or daily routines can severely threaten the feeling of being in control of one's life. It is therefore important to provide activities that help people regain or remain in control of their lives. Suggested activities to strengthen the sense of self-efficacy include:

- Assistance with debt-counselling, job training and seeking, filling in forms for benefits, etc. (already carried out by many National Societies, see <https://fednet.ifrc.org/en/ourifrc/offices/europe/what-we-do/economic-crisis/updates/> – only for RCRC staff)
- Support children to stay in school
- Promote healthy coping mechanisms and life skills
- Support healthy life styles
- Lay counselling.

## Connectedness

Having a dependable network of people, including family members, friends, neighbours and others in similar life situations provides invaluable social, emotional and practical support. But just as feelings that may arise from loss of job and livelihood can lead to self-imposed isolation and social exclusion, withdrawing from others is a common sign of distress. Suggested activities to support feelings of connectedness with other people include:

- Participating in support groups
- Playing games, engaging in sports and other social activities (for children and young people)
- Organising activities that bring families together and give them positive experiences and memories in times of adversity
- Raising awareness, for example on solidarity and against discrimination of people affected
- Focusing on particularly vulnerable groups who are not likely to seek support.

## Hope

The loss of hope may lead to apathy and depression. It is important to actively involve people affected by crisis in finding solutions by discussing options, showing they are not alone and that their concerns and fears are shared by others. Fostering hope – while maintaining a realistic outlook on the future – will enable individuals and families to find solutions and adapt to new life situations. Suggested activities for instilling hope in individuals include:

- Vocational training
- Life planning activities
- Meetings with people who have overcome similar situations
- Mentoring
- Help people find hope in rituals, spirituality, hobbies, etc.