




Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Children Affected in the Morocco Earthquake

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Letter to the Editor

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Morocco has seen numerous challenging earthquakes over the years. The Al Haouz region recently had a 6.8-magnitude earthquake on September 8, 2023. Thousands of people were hurt and nearly 3000 people died as a result of this horrific phenomena.¹ More than 100 000 children, who were severely displaced by this most recent earthquake, are in urgent need of aid, according to UNICEF. The previous substantial earthquake in Morocco happened in 2004, before the majority of the present population were born, making this incident exceptionally rare and traumatizing for children.² Consequently, this catastrophe has had a particularly devastating impact on children. These experiences have a profound impact on a child's psyche, providing an environment that is conducive to the growth of worry, fear, and misery. Children frequently show resiliency, but some may experience long-term psychological issues.³

It is challenging for young kids to receive psychiatric care because there aren't many medical facilities in the area where this earthquake occurred. Additionally, although Amazigh is widely spoken in the earthquake zone, most doctors, nurses, and psychiatrists speak Arabic, which makes it challenging to communicate and complicates mental health treatment.

The government's investment in mental health resources, including bed capacity and personnel, appears to be inadequate.⁴ Health authorities are concentrating more on enhancing mental health services as a result of its prevalence. However, there is now less than 1 psychiatrist for every 100 000 people living in Morocco.⁴ Whereas, the World Health Organization has indicated that there are 1.7 doctors per 100 000 people worldwide and 9.4 doctors per 100 000 people in Europe.⁵ Additionally, it was stated that there are only 26 child psychiatrists in Morocco (n = 26).⁵ Additionally, many of these specialties are concentrated in metropolitan regions, whereas others are in the private sector. Children therefore have a lack of professional help during these trying periods.

The psychological impact of disasters is particularly severe for children, women, and dependent older adults, making them the most vulnerable group with unique needs. Several strategies can help in the rapid recovery from post-disaster trauma. First, it's crucial to promptly reunite children with their parents or caregivers, as this can shield them from trauma and neglect.³ Caregivers also require support in the form of family-friendly shelter, housing, and provisions suitable for children.³ Implementing predisaster routines without delay, such as maintaining regular education and engaging in typical activities, can serve as a protective measure for children.³

Art therapy shows promise as an effective method for reducing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Therefore, it is advisable to consider arranging for art therapy in the earthquake shelter. Certainly, the media have noted the organization of artistic and fun activities for children after the recent Morocco earthquake, but these remain very limited. Mental health workers should also receive special training in children's trauma recovery so that they can be of assistance during the post-disaster period. These combined approaches can contribute to a more effective recovery and support system for those affected by disasters.

The earthquake in Morocco has left a deep scar on the lives of children who have experienced unimaginable loss and trauma. However, there's a lack of research and reliable evidence on psychotherapeutic approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, for PTSD in children from low- and middle-income countries facing ongoing humanitarian crises.⁶ Urgent action is required to develop innovative, culturally sensitive interventions to prevent further trauma. To provide rapid psychological support, international organizations, regional partners, and child mental health specialists must collaborate, and prompt humanitarian aid is crucial. A

comprehensive strategy addressing both physical and mental well-being of affected children is essential for their recovery.

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