Psychological Triage
EDS 246b
Preventive Psychological Interventions
Stephen E. Brock, Ph.D., NCSP

Meeting Agenda

• Definition of, and Rationale for, Psychological Triage
• Psychological Trauma Risk Factors and Warning Signs
  1. Crisis Exposure
  2. Personal Vulnerabilities
  3. Threat Perceptions
  4. Crisis Reactions
• Conducting Psychological Triage

Evaluating Psychological Trauma

1. Rationale
2. Risk factors
3. Warning signs
Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Rationale for Assessing Psychological Trauma

1. Unique consequences of crisis exposure
   • Has different effects
   • Recovery is the norm
   • Exceptions
     • Preexisting mental illness
     • Trauma history (e.g., adverse childhood experiences)

2. Unique consequences of crisis intervention
   • Can cause harm

Primum non nocere
Ψ
First, do no harm

Recognize risk factors that predict psychological trauma.
Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Psychological Trauma Risk Factors: Predictors of Traumatic Stress

- Risk Factor 1
  - Crisis exposure: Physical proximity to the crisis
    - More direct crisis exposure = trauma risk
    - Greater distance from crisis = trauma risk

Recognize risk factors that predict psychological trauma.

Psychological Trauma Risk Factors: Predictors of Traumatic Stress (cont.)

- Risk Factor 1: Physical proximity to the crisis
  - Percentage with severe PTSD 1 month after playground shooting
    - By location at the time of shooting

Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Psychological Trauma Risk Factors: Predictors of Traumatic Stress

- Risk Factor 2
  - Crisis exposure: Emotional proximity to the crisis
    - How close are individuals to each other?
Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Psychological Trauma Risk Factors: Predictors of Traumatic Stress (cont.)

- Risk Factor 2: Emotional proximity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Category</th>
<th>No one</th>
<th>Person Injured</th>
<th>Person Died</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EDS 246b</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Recognize risk factors that predict psychological trauma.

- Risk Factor 3: Pretrauma internal vulnerability
  1. Preexisting physical and psychological illness
  2. Trauma history (e.g., ACEs)
  3. Avoidance coping
  4. Social withdrawal
  5. Lower developmental level
  6. Poor self-efficacy
  7. High psychophysiological arousal
  8. Pessimism

- Recognize risk factors that predict psychological trauma.

- Risk Factor 4: Pretrauma external vulnerability
  1. Lack of family support and resources
     a. Absence of family resources
     b. Poor family functioning
     c. Parental traumatic stress
     d. Family history of PTSD
     e. Parental mental illness
     f. Poverty

- Recognize risk factors that predict psychological trauma.
Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Psychological Trauma Risk Factors: Predictors of Traumatic Stress (cont.)

- Risk Factor 4: Pretrauma external vulnerability (cont.)
  2. Lack of extrafamilial social resources
    a. Social isolation
    b. Low social support
    c. Lack of perceived social support
    d. Bias and discrimination

Recognize risk factors that predict psychological trauma.

Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Psychological Trauma Risk Factors: Predictors of Traumatic Stress (cont.)

- Risk Factor 5: Threat perceptions
  - Subjective impressions more important than exposure

- Adult reactions influence threat perceptions

Recognize risk factors that predict psychological trauma.

Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Psychological Trauma Warning Signs: Indicators of Traumatic Stress

- Early warning signs
- Enduring warning signs
- Developmental variations
- Cultural variations

Recognize risk factors that predict psychological trauma.
Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Psychological Trauma Warning Signs: Indicators of Traumatic Stress (cont.)

• Early warning signs
  • Mostly expected responses to stress
  • Generally not signs of mental illness
  • Important for survival in threatening situations

Identify the warning signs that indicate psychological trauma.

Psychological Trauma Warning Signs: Indicators of Traumatic Stress (cont.)

• Early warning signs (cont.)
  • Require immediate intervention
    1. Interference with functioning
    2. Dangerous coping behaviors
    3. Acute panic, fear, distress
    4. Dissociative states

Recognize risk factors that predict psychological trauma.

• Indicate more severe trauma
  • Persistent hyperarousal
    • When combined with particular risk factors
      1. Physical injury
      2. Death of immediate family member
      3. Preexisting mental illness
      4. Complex trauma (e.g., ACEs)
Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Psychological Trauma Warning Signs: Indicators of Traumatic Stress (cont.)

- Enduring warning signs
  - Reactions that do not remit or they worsen = more severe psychological trauma
    1. Acute stress disorder (duration = 3 days to 1 month)
    2. Posttraumatic stress disorder (duration = 4 weeks or more)

Recognize risk factors that predict psychological trauma.

Psychological Trauma Warning Signs: Indicators of Traumatic Stress (cont.)

- Cultural & religious variations
  - Every culture provides its members with recognizable languages of distress with which to communicate their suffering. If we are able to understand this language, which may be verbal or non-verbal, physical or psychological, our humanitarian interventions may be better informed.

Tearfund (2006, pp. 32–33)

- Cultural & religious variations (cont.)
  - Influence types of events judged threatening
  - Affect how individuals and communities . . .
    - Assign meaning to crises.
    - Express traumatic stress.
    - View and judge crisis reactions.
**Evaluating Psychological Trauma**

**Conducting Psychological Triage**

---

**Triage**

jury \(\text{tree-ahj}\)

noun
1. the process of sorting victims, as of a battle or disaster, to determine medical priority in order to increase the number of survivors.


---

**Conducting Psychological Triage: Levels of Triage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Primary       | Before providing interventions | Selected risk factors (exposure/ vulnerabilities) + early warning signs | 1. Estimate number of crisis interveners needed  
2. Establish initial treatment priorities  
3. Make initial individual intervention decisions |
| Secondary     | During delivery of interventions | Risk factors + early & enduring warning signs                             | 1. Refine treatment priorities  
2. Refine individual intervention decisions  
3. Begin to consider psychotherapeutic care needs |
| Referral      | As school interventions conclude | Risk factors + enduring warning signs                                      | 1. Identify ongoing psychotherapeutic care needs |
Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Conducting Psychological Triage: Preparation
- Identify school & community mental health resources.
- Identify community-based support resources.
- Develop or obtain traumatic stress screeners.
- Develop or obtain referral forms.
- Understand and learn about culture-specific crisis reactions.

Conducting Psychological Triage: A Process, Not an Event

Primary Triage
Establishes initial treatment priorities

Secondary Triage
Uses data collected during interventions

Referral Triage
Is conducted as interventions conclude

Evaluating Psychological Trauma
Conducting Psychological Triage: Primary Triage
- Begins ASAP
- Completed before initiating interventions

Primary Triage
Establishes initial treatment priorities

Secondary Triage
Uses data collected during interventions

Referral Triage
Is conducted as interventions conclude
Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Conducting Psychological Triage: Primary Triage (cont.)

- Use checklists to identify trauma risk
- Make initial crisis intervention treatment decisions
- Collect facts (Planning Section)
- Gauge trauma risk
  - Exposure (physical & emotional proximity)
  - Known pretrauma personal vulnerabilities

Conducting Psychological Triage: Secondary Triage

- Begins as interventions are initiated
- Continues during interventions

Primary Triage: Establishes initial treatment priorities
Secondary Triage: Uses data collected during interventions
Referral Triage: Is conducted as interventions conclude

Conducting Psychological Triage: Secondary Triage (cont.)

- Identifies warning signs (indicators) of traumatic stress
- Secondary triage resources:
  - Referral forms
  - Screening tools
  - Interviews

Referral Triage
- Referral forms
- Screening tools
- Interviews

Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Conducting Psychological Triage: Primary Triage (cont.)

- Use checklists to identify trauma risk
- Make initial crisis intervention treatment decisions
- Collect facts (Planning Section)
- Gauge trauma risk
  - Exposure (physical & emotional proximity)
  - Known pretrauma personal vulnerabilities

Conducting Psychological Triage: Secondary Triage

- Begins as interventions are initiated
- Continues during interventions

Primary Triage: Establishes initial treatment priorities
Secondary Triage: Uses data collected during interventions
Referral Triage: Is conducted as interventions conclude

Conducting Psychological Triage: Secondary Triage (cont.)

- Identifies warning signs (indicators) of traumatic stress
- Secondary triage resources:
  - Referral forms
  - Screening tools
  - Interviews

Referral Triage
- Referral forms
- Screening tools
- Interviews
Conducting Psychological Triage: Referral Triage

- Conducted as interventions conclude
- Identifies mental illness

Primary Triage
Establishes initial treatment priorities

Secondary Triage
Uses data collected during interventions

Referral Triage
Is conducted as interventions conclude

Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Conducting Psychological Triage: Referral Triage (cont.)

- Identifies ongoing treatment needs
  - Severe or dangerous reactions
  - Enduring reactions
  - Mental illness (e.g., PTSD)
  - Requires a tracking system

Survivors of traumatic events who do not manifest symptoms after approximately two months generally do not require follow-up.

National Institute of Mental Health (2002, p. 9)
Evaluating Psychological Trauma

1. Activity: Primary Triage Practice
   2. Concluding Comment

Conducting Psychological Triage
Activity: Primary Triage Practice

- Break into small groups.
- Refer to Handout, “Primary Evaluation of Psychological Trauma,” and discuss your assigned crisis situation.
- Answer questions regarding:
  - Level of mental health crisis intervention
  - Primary assessment of trauma risk
  - Record your thoughts and share your discussion.

Conducting Psychological Triage
Activity: Primary Triage (Crisis Situation 1)

- A local gang, in response to the physical beating of a fellow gang member by a student at your high school, came onto your campus. A fight broke out in the student parking lot between the gang and the student’s friends. A 15-year-old gang member is hospitalized with a stab wound, and one of your students died from a gunshot wound. Your principal tried to intervene; she is hospitalized with serious stab wounds and is not expected to live.
Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Conducting Psychological Triage:
Activity: Primary Triage (Crisis Situation 2)

• A popular fifth-grade teacher at your elementary school was supervising his students on a field trip to a local lake. He tragically drowned after hitting his head on a rock while trying to rescue a student who had fallen into the lake.

Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Conducting Psychological Triage:
Activity: Primary Triage (Crisis Situation 3)

• An irate father comes to your elementary school at 8:30 am, a half hour after school has started. He heads to his daughter's kindergarten classroom without checking in with the office. The father enters the classroom and begins to hit his daughter. As the astounded class and teacher watch, he severely beats her. Leaving the girl unconscious, he storms out the door and drives off in his car. The event takes place in less than 5 minutes.

Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Conducting Psychological Triage:
Activity: Primary Triage (Crisis Situation 4)

• One of your third-grade teachers is presenting a lesson and has just soundly reprimanded students for continuing to talk out; in fact, she is still very upset. Suddenly she turns pale, clutches her chest, and falls to the ground in front of 29 horrified children. Two frightened children run to the office, sobbing the news. The teacher is taken by ambulance to the hospital, where it is discovered that she suffered a massive heart attack. She never regains consciousness and dies the next morning.
Evaluating Psychological Trauma

Conducting Psychological Triage: Concluding Comment and Discussion

• With the effects of teacher expectations in mind, we should note that teacher assistance, while often a valuable source of scaffolding on difficult tasks, may be counterproductive if students don’t really need it. When students struggle temporarily with a task, the unsolicited help of their teacher may communicate the message that they have low ability and little control regarding their own successes and failures. In contrast, allowing students to struggle on their own for a reasonable period of time conveys the belief that students do have the ability to succeed on their own.

Ormrod (1999, p. 451)