

Busan Psychological Support Center for Disaster Victims: History and Accomplishment Report

Jeong Yee Bae
Inje University

According to the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Secretariat, 9 among the top 10 countries with the highest disaster-related deaths were situated in Asia. South Korea, being a developed country, suffers great physical and psychological damage from these disaster-related adversities. The endless pursuit of the Korean government to reduce numbers of high death tolls, casualties and economic losses caused by either natural or human-induced disasters has made its turn by providing its people a more holistic approach. As material relief helps disaster victims regain their physical losses, the government sees it as equally important to aid their psychological needs to prevent long-term mental health problems. Recently, numerous cases of post-disaster mental problems were given attention. In effect, a nationwide psychological support system was carefully planned and finally realized early this year. This paper highlights Korea's first regional psychological support center for disaster victims, its humble beginnings and by far, its latest

accomplishments. With the establishment of this center, Korea continues its pursuit to improve its people's quality of life and create a better future for generations to come.

Key Words: disasters, emergency, risk management, mental health

I. Background

Disasters are defined as unforeseen and often sudden events that cause great damage, destruction and human suffering(Center for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters, 2009). May it be natural or technological, a disaster not only brings a great deal of damage at the time it strikes but it also leaves more than a handful of wreckage to deal with.

Last year, out of the 354 disasters that occurred worldwide, Asia remained the most affected continent that suffered 40% of the total number of natural disasters. Moreover, it was reported that 9 among the top 10 countries with the highest disaster-related deaths were situated in

Asia (UNISDR, 2009). Although, there was a decrease in the number of victims, the economic damage costs in Asia increased greatly in 2008 with \$US181 billion compared to the annual average of \$US81 billion in 2000-2007 (Guha-Sapir, 2009). Asia's contribution to the global economic damage costs due to natural disasters almost doubled from 34% in the period 2000-2007 to 62% in 2008 (CRED, 2009). Developed countries such as South Korea commonly experience huge economic deficits when facing disaster-related adversities, hence they are advised to invest more in disaster risk reduction measures (Kokai, *et. al.*, 2004).

Due to its naturally mountainous hazardscape and its geographical location in eastern Asia, the South Korean peninsula is prone to experience typhoons, floods, droughts, landslides, snowstorms, tsunami, and earthquakes (Van Boskirk, 2006). Annually, natural disasters within the country result in damages adding up to USD700million and an average of 160, 600 acres (64, 992 hectares) of flooded land and 165 deaths (Van Boskirk, 2006).

1. Past major disasters

In NEMA's 2007 statistical report for 1995-2006, an average of 10 natural disasters (mostly typhoons and floods) per year. Within this time frame, the disaster-related mortality rate was 119 persons per year and the average economic loss amounted to KRW 1.9 trillion (\$US1.9 billion) per annum. The country suffered most when Super Typhoon Rusa hit the entire nation in April 2002. Rusa alone caused an overall economic loss that

reached £ KR ₩5.1 trillion (\$US5.1 billion). In addition to natural disasters, human-induced disasters also brought great grief to Korean society, with an annual average of 703 deaths, 2258 injured people, and an economic loss of KR ₩706 billion (\$US706 million) within the same time frame. The most notable among these were the fire incident in a Daegu subway train that killed 192 persons in 2003, leaving 148 casualties, and Yangyang's huge fire that left 420 families homeless in 2005 (Lee, *et. al.* 2003).

The rapid industrialization of Korea had unfavorable consequences when two massive, well-known structures collapsed: Han River's Seongsudegyeo Bridge and the Sampung department store (NEMA, 2007).

2. Post-disaster mental health issues

Cases of post-disaster mental problems have been increasing throughout the country. In 2000, it was reported that 22% of the general population were exposed to disasters and that some disasters can cause chronic mental health impairment (Briere and Elliott, 2000). In an urbanized locality, it was found that 80% of Koreans living there had been exposed to traumatic experiences at least once throughout their entire lifetime. Among these traumatic experiences were traffic accidents and natural disasters, accounting for 36% and 30%, respectively (Eun, *et. al.*, 2001).

3. A holistic disaster management approach

The Korean government aims to provide their nation with a holistic approach in managing and reducing disaster-related problems. They are to

achieve this through the following steps as presented in their national report at World Conference on Disaster Reduction:

1. "It is required to strengthening close cooperation in the region. It is desirable to have several practical cooperation programs and training that can yield ready-to-use outputs. Programs provided by ADPC, ADRC and other international or regional organizations need to be more actively developed and publicized.

2. Even when the government prepares perfect policies or organizations to reduce disaster losses, the government cannot do it alone without active participation of citizens. More public education and participation are desired. Programs to increase public awareness should be discussed as one of the top priorities in the WCDR.

3. Sustainable development can be defined as development that does not increase disaster potential or vulnerability...The Disaster Impact Assessment system, which is currently put in force in Korea and actually reduce disaster factors, can be a good example for implementing sustainable development.

4. Budget for disaster reduction project is sometimes considered as a simple cost, not an investment. Methodology or strategy that can change the concept and increase disaster reduction budget needs to be addressed." (Park, 2005).

As the whole country wept, people continuously felt the ongoing aftermath of these disasters, both physically and emotionally. Since the occurrence of large-scale disasters, the Korean government stayed focused on giving material relief, like food, shelter, clothing, and financial assistance, to

affected people. However, emotional and mental health problems, such as anxiety, shock, depression, and PTSD, were not given enough attention.

The endless pursuit of the Korean government to reduce numbers of high death tolls, casualties and economic losses caused by either natural or human-induced disasters has made its turn by providing its people a more holistic approach.

As material relief helps disaster victims regain their physical losses, the government sees it as equally important to aid their psychological needs to prevent further incidences of long-term mental health problems.

4. Nationwide call for disaster mental health awareness

The foundation of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) happened in 2004. This government agency supervises all issues relating to disasters, accidents, and emergencies in Korea (Van Boskirk, 2006).

Disaster victims were provided relief goods and shelter to aid their physical needs, but their mental state was frequently overlooked. According to diverse studies, it is likely that every person who suffers the loss of loved ones and hard-earned possessions faces anxiety, depression, shock, and acute post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as immediate sequelae to the disaster experience (You, *et. al.* 1997; Jeong, *et. al.* 1999; Han, *et. al.* 2002; Chae, *et. al.* 2005; Adams and Boscarino, 2006; Lasiuk and Hegadoren, 2006).

In effect, a nationwide psychological support system was carefully planned and finally realized

early this year.

Accordingly, from September 2007 to March 2008, NEMA conducted a nationwide research for the construction of a nationwide emotional support system for disaster victims. Based on research results, NEMA carried out local seminars in major cities to spread the importance of having emotional and psychological support systems after disasters. As a major city, Busan was privileged to host one of NEMA's seminars in May 2008. During the seminar, NEMA announced its plan of establishing regional support centers for efficient community-based rehabilitation.

II. Birth of Busan Psychological Support Center for Disaster Victims

1. Official launch and objectives

After months of working with NEMA and Busan Metropolitan City, Inje University's College of Medicine was chosen as headquarters of the first regional psychological support center. On 26 August 2008, after the final preparations were set, the center was established and named "Psychological Support Center for Disaster Victims."

The primary goal of this establishment is to provide emotional and physical assistance to disaster victims and their families, ensuring their safety and welfare for the long-term improvement of each citizen's quality of life. The specific objectives of the center are to:

1. Provide wide-ranging and continuous emotional support to disaster victims including their families, affected civilians, and rescue workers.

2. Gather and form a disaster support system network from the available community-based resources, such as agencies, organizations and academic institutions, with materials and labor.

3. Provide training and education on disaster support for disaster professionals and volunteers.

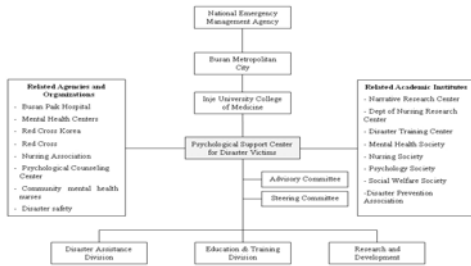
4. Develop programs for disaster support, training, and education.

5. Conduct region-wide research on the prevalence, mortality, loss, and presenting problems in disaster-prone areas.

6. Provide learning and resource materials on disaster education and incorporate emotional support in various curricula.

2. Organization & divisions

Together with Inje University's College of Medicine and the Office of Busan Metropolitan City, the center welcomed different groups of professionals to collaborate with the center's affairs. Currently, the center is comprised of three major divisions: disaster assistance, education and training, and research and development. At present the total personnel behind the center is composed of 47 nurses, 24 social workers, 20 psychologists, 11 psychiatrists, and 72 volunteers. An advisory committee, together with a steering committee, helps the center's director to supervise all of its undertakings. Moreover, the center is now affiliated with a number of academic institutions, agencies, and organizations within the region, forming a network with a common goal: to provide support to all disaster victims(Fig. 1).



<Figure 1. Organizational Chart>

3. Roles and functions

When disaster strikes, the center's Disaster Assistance Division primarily functions in providing the following services. The cited case reports were conducted previously by the authors and are used in this section to convey the magnitude of each role and function.

1. Initial Needs Assessment

As with any standard operating procedure, an initial needs assessment or screening is necessary to be conducted. This is done in order to be knowledgeable of the disaster victims' actual number, demography, and mental health state. Gaining knowledge of these facts will not only help archive figures for future reference but also aid in preparing the proper support as the circumstance asks.

2. Consultation

During the Daegu subway train fire accident in 2003, several adults evacuated their homes, abandoning their children alone in their houses. Through consultations, the stress felt about leaving children unattended during a time of crisis was pointed out. Educational materials were distributed on the proper caring of children.

3. Outreach

On 7 December 2007, Tean Bay suffered from an oil leakage coming from a tanker ship and an outreach team was sent (nurses, psychologists, and sociologists) to screen affected civilians. At that time, fishermen complained of headaches, itching sensations, and the odor coming from the oil spill. Screenings for PTSD also were conducted and meetings with community team leaders and advisors were assembled during home visits.

4. Debriefing and Defusing

In 2003, a significant number of Daegu subway fire victims suffered from PTSD and were unaware of the possible strategies for coping. They had to put up with severe distress, so we sent a team to visit them and created a self-help group called "Biteul Chatnin Saramdeul", which in English means "People Who Seek Light". This involved debriefing, defusing emotional trauma, sharing experiences, and helping the group members to deal with stress.

5. Education

In the summer of 2006, Kangun Province experienced a flood and landslides. Several people lost their homes and farms, forcing them to move to nearby provinces. This move ignited conflict between adjacent provinces as everyone feared and fought for their own survival. For 6 months, a number of affected people lived in container vans. Support groups educated and resolved the existing conflict. Educational materials, such as leaflets on how to deal with stress, were distributed.

6. Crisis Counseling

As a result of the Daegu subway fire in 2003, Kim, a 52 year old woman, suffered the loss of her daughter in the fire and had to care for her two grandsons ever since. As a result of stress and guilt, she attempted suicide. During the crisis counseling sessions that were offered to her, she admitted her longing for her daughter and remorsefully realized that attempting suicide was not a solution.

III. Accomplishment report

After a year since its conception, the Busan Psychological Support Center for Disaster Victims has participated in many disaster reduction seminars, conducted disaster management and post disaster mental health awareness seminars, and published a guide book on psychological support for disaster victims (Fig. 2).



<Figure 2. Guide Book: Psychological Support for Disaster Victims>

The Philippines marked July as their "National Disaster Consciousness Month" and during this time, emergency response drills are exercised in public places like hospitals, metro rails etc (Dela Pena, 2009). This year, as Filipinos prepared for disasters, Busan suffered from one as heavy rains

covered the city for consecutive days.

A particular incident in Suyeong occurred 16th of July, 2009, Thursday, when a landslide and flood enveloped residential houses and buried parked cars (Fig 3).



<Figure 3. Car jammed in rubble. Suyeong, 16 July 2009.>

The Center responded after deliberating and planning their course of action (Fig 4). Different teams were made and sent to perform their assigned tasks.



Figure 4. Meeting for team designations, Inje University>

Upon arrival at the site, the center representatives and volunteers immediately communicated with the provincial officers



<Figure 5. Coordinating with Suyeong provincial officers>



<Figure 7. A volunteer guiding one of the Center's teams to the affected houses>

present in order to have a draft of the situation as well as for courtesy call purposes (Fig 5). Red Cross were also present to coordinated with other volunteers and organizations (Fig 6).



<Figure 6. Collaborating with Red Cross volunteers>



<Figure 8. A center representative counseling a resident after the incident>

Teams from our center inspected the gravity of the incident and interviewed the residents. They found out that the people evacuated in time so none of the residents were seriously hurt (Fig 7).

Other teams were tasked to provide psychological support and counseling to the disaster victims. The interview focused on providing psychological support to get through the tragic experience and rebuild a new life after that (Fig 8).

The center then studied the facts of this event that will enable them to better prepare for future disaster-related adversities.

The center's future projects include national collaborations with other regional psychological support centers and international collaboration with agencies like the United Nations.

At present, the center is conducting research and overseeing projects to help Busan City's application to become one of the World Health Organization's "safe communities" under the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre on Community Safety Promotion project. With the establishment of this center, Korea continues its pursuit to improve its people's quality of life and create a better future for generations to come.

The center sees that preparedness for and good management of disasters must involve emotional care and support. We hope that our center will encourage other regions of the world to establish similar centers that focus on the significant long-term emotional support of disaster victims, their carers, and other members of their community.

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