Symposium on Crisis, Disaster and Trauma Psychology
'Lessons learned from the European Countries,
On psychological first aid, strengthening psychological resilience, recent developments and consequences of COVID-19'

PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE COMMUNITY-RESILIENCE BUILDING

Nataša Todorović, Psychologist, MPH
Red Cross of Serbia

Psychological First Aid and Psychosocial support in emergencies

- Providing Psychological First Aid and psychosocial support in emergencies always reflects the fundamental principles and values of the Red Cross.
- Red Cross always supports the most vulnerable population groups
- In emergencies these groups are under a higher risk of exclusion, stigma, discrimination, abuse

COVID-19 Red Cross of Serbia activities in general

- 729,471 individual services provided
- 349,685 households directly supported
- 191,623 individual instances of volunteer engagement
- 585,522 hours of volunteer work
- 915,527 kilometres of road travelled while providing support
- 474,312 food and hygiene parcels distributed
- 5,102 persons supported through cash assistance
- Nearly one million assisted in accessing vaccination

COVID-19 - Red Cross of Serbia remote Psychological First Aid and Psychosocial support

During the first wave in 2020:

- 128 telephone info centres across the country
- Special telephone help centre in the red Cross of Serbia HQ – independent supervision by psychologists, almost 9,000 calls.
- Four SMS-based services for deaf and hard of hearing persons
- Staffed with volunteers trained in psychosocial support
- Mobile and desktop application „Let's talk" developed providing text, audio or video support by 5 volunteer psychologists
- Attention to privacy and security as well as referral to professional services where necessary
- Self-help groups for older persons as an effective form of psychological first aid
- Almost 400,000 individuals assisted remotely between March 2020 and March 2021

COVID-19 Red Cross of Serbia Psychological First Aid and Psychosocial support and older persons

- Focus of my work is on ageing and older persons, as well as persons with disabilities
- During the first wave PFA and PSS majority of beneficiaries were **persons over 65 68.79%** and 2.99% persons with disabilities
- The Red Cross of Serbia also provided psychosocial support to 2,938 of its own staff and volunteers during this period

- 15.22% women over 75
- 18.31% women between 65 and 75
- 9.58% men over 75
- 16.94% men between 65 and 75
- 8.74% men between 50 and 64
- 18.67% women between 50 and 64
- 4.05% women between 30 and 49
- 4.05% men between 30 and 49
- 0,46% women between 18 and 29
- 0.34% men between 18 and 29
- 0,46% women below 18
- 0.34% men below 18
- 2.99% persons with disabilities

COVID-19 Red Cross of Serbia Psychological First Aid and Psychosocial support and older persons

- Most callers initially called due to lack of clear information and related fears and uncertainties
- The epidemic, accompanied with „infodemic“ brought with it all kinds of rumours, misinformation and doubts
- This in turn caused different psychological issues in many people: anxiety, fear, stress
- The Red Cross volunteers were trained and instructed to provide both accurate, verified and clear to understand information as well as psychological first aid

COVID-19 Resilience project: Red Cross of Serbia and regional partners

- The pandemic brought with it the uncertainties for older persons and other at risk groups:
  - existential worries,
  - infection, immunity, vaccine
  - effects on health and potential fatal outcome,
  - the uncertainty of how long the pandemic may last,
  - uncertainties related to financial security of older persons and persons with disabilities themselves as well as their families.
- Continuing stress over a prolonged period poses a risk to mental health of older persons and persons with disabilities

COVID-19 Resilience project: Red Cross of Serbia and regional partners

“Strengthening resilience of older persons and persons with disabilities during COVID-19 and future disasters”

- A three year initiative in the region of the Western Balkans, coordinated by the Red Cross of Serbia and supported by the European Union, Austrian Development Agency and Austrian Red Cross.

- Connects civil society partners from Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo*and large civil society networks representing older persons and persons with disabilities at the level of European Union (AGE Platform Europe, European Disability Forum)

COVID-19 Resilience project: Red Cross of Serbia and regional partners; objectives

- Contribute to strengthened resilience of older persons and persons with disabilities in the Western Balkans during COVID-19 and future disasters.
- Older persons, persons with disabilities, CSOs and grassroots organisations will be able to better cope with the COVID-19

COVID-19 Resilience project: Red Cross of Serbia and regional partners

- Four thematic areas:
  - **Mental health**
  - Relief/ Cash and Voucher Assistance
  - Strengthening Local Communities
  - Research/ public policy/ advocacy

COVID-19 Resilience project: Mental health

Mental health objectives of the project

- Mental health of 60,000 older persons and persons with disabilities is preserved and their resilience enhanced through:
  - Provision of accurate, timely and accessible information from verified trusted sources including on the epidemic, response progression and measures of protection and self-protection (e.g. elder abuse or abuse of a person with disabilities in family context) as well as individual rights
  - Provision of PFA, PSS services to ensure preservation of mental health and building of resilience

COVID-19 Resilience project: Mental health

Mental health activities of the project

- Review of provided psychological first aid and psychosocial support during the first wave of COVID-19 epidemic and assessment of needs
- Training for volunteers
- Provision of timely, accurate and accessible information
- Provision of PFA and PSS including evaluation of services and adjustment

COVID-19 Resilience project: Mental health

Tailored approach

- Older persons and persons with disabilities are very heterogeneous population and „one size fits all“ service design is not appropriate
- The project acknowledges different capacities and different needs of different older persons and persons with disabilities
- It provides different services to those who have mobility issues, informal caregivers, population in rural areas, population in urban areas, depending on their needs and capacities
- Some services are provided remotely (information, referral, psychosocial support) and some are provided face to face, with attention to epidemiological safety (support with procurement of groceries or payment of bills, psychosocial support)

COVID-19 Resilience project: Mental health

Achievements in mental health activities so far

- There are 30 regional centres for provision of remote psychological first aid and psychosocial support
- The Red Cross of Serbia provided three training opportunities in 6 months supported by further supervising sessions.
- Partners engaged in training their own staff/volunteers and promotional activities across various media channels.
- An initial stigma of contacting the helpline was reported across the region.
- The preliminary results suggest that there has been over 2000 calls made between April and September 2021.
- The three main themes of the calls were: 1. COVID-19 related issues and enquiries, 2. loneliness and a need to talk to someone and 3. practical assistance.

COVID-19 Resilience project: Mental health

- PFA is made to be available to all
- In emergencies, rapid needs assessment must include mental health needs
- PFA is especially important at local level where people know and trust each other
- Focus on suppressing rumours and misinformation as this will reduce anxiety
- Include psychologists in creating messages for population to ensure desired effect
- Continuing education and training of helpers
- Networking for all the key actors in the community

https://www.redcross.org.rs/media/3297/psiholoska-prva-pomoc-vodic-za-terenske-radnike-e-knjiga.pdf

https://www.redcross.org.rs/media/4020/e-prirucnik.pdf

Red Cross of Serbia Research: Mental health of informal caregivers

- Implemented during and after the 2020 lockdown
- Included 798 informal caregivers from 41 municipalities in Serbia
- The main goal of the research:
  - look at the impact and effects of informal care (especially during the COVID-19 epidemic) on mental health of caregivers
  - based on the results of the research, develop recommendations for planning and development of public policies to improve their quality of life, promote the improvement of their mental health and develop support services.

Red Cross of Serbia research: Mental health of informal caregivers

- The age of the informal caregivers in this study ranged from 18 to 92.
- The largest number of the polled informal caregivers provide care to one person (84.9%)
- 12.6% provide care to two persons
- COVID-19 pandemic made the challenges faced by informal caregivers on a daily basis dramatically more complex.
- Greater limitations of health and social services, isolation and constant concern for the health of the care recipient and own health
- Inability to secure disinfectants and other necessary sanitary supplies

Red Cross of Serbia research: Mental health of informal caregivers

Main results of the research:

- Mild depression was present in 11.2% of informal caregivers, and moderate depression in 8.6% of respondents. Seven percent of informal caregivers were severely depressed.
- During the pandemic, informal caregivers needed protective equipment (32%), information (29.3%), while 18.5% of informal caregivers needed additional support and 14.8% of informal caregivers needed hygiene items.
- Also, 67.3% are now more concerned about own health and/ or health of the person they provide care to.

Red Cross of Serbia research: Mental health of informal caregivers

Main results of the research

- A higher overall burden is identified in informal caregivers with following characteristics
  - poorer self-assessed health,
  - provide care to a person with a higher degree of complexity and dependence in performing basic activities of everyday life,
  - insufficient financial resources to meet the needs of the person being cared for
  - longer duration of day care

Црвени крст Србије
Red Cross of Serbia

Thank you for your attention

natasa@redcross.org.rs