

After the deluge

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Counting the loss: The floods that ravaged Paravur in Ernakulam rendered immeasurable damages to households residing in the area. Reality will hit flood survivors as they start going back home from relief camps - THE HINDU / THULASI KAKKAT

As Kerala's flood-affected return home to find their lives in disarray, spiralling mental health issues among the victims are becoming a growing concern

M. thinks of death every time he remembers how the flood waters engulfed his house and small business unit. The 48-year-old resident of Thiruvalla in Kerala is haunted by the fact that he lost a lifetime's earnings in the rains that lashed his town last week. What else can he do but take his life, he asks in despair.

Psychologists are keeping a close watch on the businessman at a relief camp. Since the heavy rains that started on August 8, flooding many parts of Kerala and leaving at least seven lakh people homeless, relief operations have rescued thousands, who have been housed in 5,000-odd temporary relief camps.

Health experts are coming across more and more people suffering from depression or severe anxiety. At least three have committed suicide so far.

“M. is so severely depressed that he wants to end his life,” says psychiatrist Roy Abraham Kallivayalil, who has been counselling him. “I spent considerable time telling him that all his material losses would be taken care of by the government,” says the secretary general of the World Psychiatric Association.

But the reality will start hitting the people as they start going back home, the psychiatrist warns. Shino Varghese knows what Abraham is talking about. The 38-year-old resident of Maradi panchayat in Muvattupuzha could not believe his eyes when he returned home from a relief camp earlier this week. “It seemed as if someone had come in and wreaked havoc. The household items were dumped all over and the floor was covered with knee-deep clay and slush. I was in shock and despair,” he says.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 30-40 per cent of the victims of catastrophic natural disasters suffer from major mental distress and require counselling.

“The floods have had a psychological impact for sure. It will take just three days of steady rain for people to abandon their homes now. The fear has set in,” says Varghese.

For days now, Kerala has been in the news with its tales of collaboration and compassion. For hundreds of people such as Sara John, senior project officer at a Kochi-based research institute, the floods revealed the strength of the people.

A week after the deluge, the rescue operations are winding up, while large-scale rebuilding and rehabilitation will be the next long-drawn step. But meanwhile, there are concerns about the mental scars that the floods have left behind.

“Mental health is now a pressing issue among flood victims. The state health system is very good and cases of physical trauma and spread of infectious diseases are being actively addressed. Psychological issues, on the other hand, may tend to be a larger problem,” says Dr Sulfi N, secretary, Indian Medical Association (IMA), Kerala. The government is paying heed to this growing concern. State culture minister E K Balan on Tuesday urged artistes in the state to visit relief camps to help victims get over their trauma. “There is a realisation that mental trauma needs to be taken care of,” says Dr Sriji N Kumar, former president of IMA (Kerala). “As part of the relief operations, we are inviting artistes, big or small, to come and perform in the camps so that victims get some emotional relief and lighten up.”

The state health department has ordered that at least two psychology experts or counsellors be sent to each relief camp. IMA Kerala has set up a panel of psychiatrists across the districts to tend to people in the camps.

“Children and senior citizens are particularly vulnerable, as are lactating mothers. At the moment, what we are witnessing among victims is anxiety. This can, in the long term, turn into PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder,” warns Sulfi.



Talking point: Community-level sessions by trained counsellors can play a vital role in helping survivors heal -
THE HINDU / THULASI KAKKAT

Mental stress knows no boundaries, and doctors have also been reporting anxiety among people who have not been directly affected by the floods. "People who live by the lakes and rivers and have watched the catastrophe unfold are complaining of insomnia and headache," adds Sulfi.

The victims experienced not just extensive material loss, but also stress brought on by the wait for rescue. Over the past few days, Naval Commander Vijay Varma watched dozens of stricken faces from the cockpit of his advanced light helicopter as survivors were hauled up from rooftops and balconies in flood-swept localities.

Consultant psychiatrist PN Suresh Kumar agrees. He was part of a team of experts from Thanal Crisis Intervention Centre, Kozhikode, who visited the relief camps at Wayanad's Valiyapara and neighbouring regions last week and found many people in need of counselling. "Most of the elderly women were in a state of shock and complained of insomnia, anxiety and fear. Some said they could not forget the sight of boulders rolling down. A few were numb and had no appetite," he says.

While disaster survivors need immediate physical support, they subsequently require psychological aid as well. "Now they are together in the camp, getting food, clothes and medicines and are visited by elected representatives. All this have a therapeutic effect. But that might change once they find themselves on their own, left to rebuild their lives," he adds.

Kumar suggests community-level sessions by trained counsellors to help survivors heal. “The WHO had released disaster related counselling programmes after the 2004 tsunami. Group therapies where people who have survived similar disaster share their experiences will help,” he says.

Recent news reports said Kerala government has approached the Bengaluru-based National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences to help flood victims cope with loss. The Department of Health Sciences has also released a set of guidelines to aid post-flood recovery. While it suggests a series of health tips, it also underscores the need to tackle mental stress. It encourages people to seek psychological help and instructs practitioners to anticipate long-term mental health issues.

G Padmanabhan, a Delhi-based disaster management expert, underlines that the community is the bedrock of rehabilitation and stresses the need for psycho-sociological support for survivors. “It is easy to mobilise volunteer-based community programmes. In more serious cases, when problems persist, a patient might require medical care or short hospitalisation. It is traumatic for people to watch the strong houses they lived in being washed away or breaking apart. Some will go into depression,” he adds.

Talking and listening, says Padmanabhan, will help address such problems.

It is what John believes in too. “It is important to not let the spirit with which we helped each other fade,” she says.

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