Editorials
The mental health effects of terrorism and traumatic events

Editoriali
Gli effetti sulla salute mentale del terrorismo e degli eventi traumatici

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In these days there is an increasing awareness of the need to improve our understanding of the mental health effects of terrorism, of natural disasters and of traumatic events occurring in our world. So what are the most urgent challenges that we need to address? First, it is necessary to develop the scientific research in this field, in order to improve the evidence-based mental health interventions that can be implemented following these events. We need to provide better psychological care to the individuals directly or indirectly involved and suffering from symptoms, or reactions or responses to all kinds of extraordinarily distressing events. Then we need to help reduce the most dangerous and severe consequences of trauma, such as post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), by developing brief and relatively cheap preventive intervention programmes that can be offered, immediately after a severe trauma, to all those at greater risk because of current or past mental disorders. Finally we need to try to minimize or buffer the mental health effects of traumatic events on the wider society. The study of the relationship between distress and psychopathology is a classical approach adopted by mental health researchers, particularly those interested in social and environmental issues. This approach is becoming more relevant in these times, with such an increasing number of communities around the world being victimised by terrorism or exposed to different types of severe trauma, an example being refugees, who flee from terror, persecution and misery.

Two Editorials in the present issue of Epidemiologia e Psichiatria Sociale (EPS), discuss these pressing issues. The first, by Carol North and Betty Pfefferbaum, from the Department of Psychiatry of the Washington University...
in St. Louis, USA, presents the current state of research regarding the mental health effects of terrorism. The Authors are leading authorities in this field and their work is very well known and highly appreciated. I would like to highlight some of the key data reported by them for the readers of EPS: between 25% and 50% of survivors, directly exposed to terrorist attacks, can be expected to develop PTSD. Moreover, most of those survivors who do not develop a diagnosable psychiatric illness suffer from painful, severe, and often long-term reactions. We cannot forget these consequences, even when we are understandably distracted by the concern for the victims who lose their lives. Systematic comparisons with survivors of disasters of different types can help us to understand better these mental health effects and how we can provide more effective support and treatment.

The second Editorial has been written for EPS by Benedetto Vitiello, from the Child and Adolescent Treatment and Preventive Intervention Research Branch at the NIMH, Bethesda, USA. It focuses on children affected by severe trauma and on the trauma-induced psychopathology, including PTSD. Dr. Vitiello reminds us that exposure to certain trauma involves a greater risk for PTSD and that a better understanding of risk, as well as of protective factors, is essential for developing specific, targeted interventions for children at high risk. Also the available treatment strategies, both pharmacological and psychotherapeutic, need to be better evaluated, to guide our decision-making regarding treatment. Again, evidence-based research has a key role.

The future research agenda on mental health effects of traumatic events, including terrorism, needs to develop along several lines: (i) We need to establish procedures for a rapid access to disaster-affected populations. The interventions should include early data collection, while offering immediate psychological aid; (ii) Longitudinal research, with standardised instruments and methodologies, is necessary to improve our knowledge on post-disaster mental health recovery and on the variables that may help to predict outcome; (iii) Sub-populations affected by severely traumatic events need to be compared, taking into account biological as well as psychosocial characteristics.

What are the resources, at the national level, dedicated to research and to education and training in this field?

Il secondo Editoriale è stato scritto per EPS da Benedetto Vitiello, della Child and Adolescent Treatment and Preventive Intervention Research Branch del NIMH di Bethesda, USA. Esso riguarda in particolare i bambini che soffrono di traumi gravi e tratta della psicopatologia che si sviluppa in seguito al trauma, compresi i PTSD. Il Dr. Vitiello ci ricorda che l’esposizione a certi traumi aumenta il rischio di PTSD e che una migliore conoscenza dei fattori di rischio così come dei fattori preventivi è essenziale per sviluppare interventi specifici, dedicati ai bambini a maggior rischio. Anche le strategie di intervento attualmente disponibili, sia quelle farmacologiche sia quelle psicoterapeutiche, hanno bisogno di essere valutate meglio per informare in modo evidence-based le nostre scelte. Di nuovo la ricerca ha, dunque, un ruolo chiave.

L’agenda delle cose da fare in futuro, per quanto riguarda la ricerca sugli effetti degli eventi traumatici, compreso il terrorismo, sulla salute mentale, dovrebbe svilupparsi secondo varie linee: (i) È necessario mettere a punto procedure per un rapido accesso alle popolazioni colpite dai disastri. Gli interventi dovrebbero includere la raccolta di dati, effettuata mentre si offre aiuto psicologico; (ii) Sono necessari studi longitudinali, effettuati utilizzando strumenti e metodologie standardizzate, per migliorare le nostre conoscenze sul recupero dell’equilibrio emotivo dopo il disastro e sulle variabili in grado di predire l’esito; (iii) Abbiamo bisogno di confrontare diversi sottogruppi di popolazioni colpite da eventi traumatici gravi, prendendo in considerazione le loro caratteristiche biologiche e psicosociali.

Quali sono le risorse, a livello nazionale, dedicate alla ricerca ed alla formazione in questo settore?