

Navigating the Terrain: Opportunities and Challenges of Implementing Psychological First Aid in Disaster Response

Brian Warbung^{1)*}, Kusuma²⁾, Bambang Wahyudi³⁾, Pujo Widodo⁴⁾

^{1,2,3,4)}Disaster Management, Faculty of National Security, Indonesian Defense University

*Corresponding Author

Email: brianwarbungbx@gmail.com

Abstract

Psychological First Aid (PFA) has become crucial in disaster response due to its impact on the mental health of affected individuals. This study explores the implementation of PFA, using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to deeply understand the experiences and perceptions of those involved. The phenomenological approach, provides insight into the lived experiences of PFA practitioners and recipients, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. Findings reveal that while PFA can enhance awareness, service access, and community resilience, challenges such as limited resources, a shortage of trained personnel, and cultural differences persist. Addressing these issues requires collaborative efforts, improved training, and cultural sensitivity to optimize PFA's effectiveness. Future research should focus on developing better implementation strategies and monitoring PFA's impact on mental well-being in disaster-affected communities.

Keywords: *Psychological First Aid (PFA), Disaster Management Response, Psychological Impact, Disaster Mitigation, Community Resilience*

INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters and trauma incidents have been an inseparable part of human reality throughout history. From earthquakes to tropical storms, disasters can cause extensive damage and destruction, both physically and psychologically. One aspect often overlooked of the impact of disasters is their effect on the mental well-being of those affected. Post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and various other mental health issues often emerge as direct consequences of experiencing a disaster.

In normal circumstances, initial response to victims of natural disasters is typically carried out by formal healthcare providers who tend to focus on addressing the physical and material aspects of the victims' losses. However, besides inflicting physical harm, the psychological impact of natural disasters is noteworthy. The psychological impact phenomena resulting from natural disasters can be likened to an iceberg, where the visible surface may not seem significant, but the underlying effects can be deeply concerning if not adequately addressed. In terms of psychological interventions for disaster victims, family, friends, and other community members can serve as early responders, providing initial assistance before professional healthcare providers can intervene (Kitchener & Jorm, 2008).

In recent decades, awareness of the importance of rapid and appropriate psychological intervention in disaster response has significantly increased. Psychological First Aid (PFA) has emerged as a valuable approach in providing psychological support to individuals affected by disasters. Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an early psychological intervention designed to help disaster-affected individuals cope with stress and trauma (Allen, et al., 2010). PFA aims not to resolve all psychological issues arising from a disaster but rather to provide emotional and practical support to help victims stabilize and build resilience in facing difficult situations. Unlike complex clinical approaches, PFA emphasizes simple principles such as active listening, providing emotional support, and directing individuals towards their own inner resources.

The concept of PFA was first proposed in the 1990s by Jonathan I. Bisson and George S. Everly. They developed PFA in response to the need for effective psychological interventions in disaster situations. In 2002, the World Health Organization (WHO) published the first PFA guideline titled "Psychological First Aid: Guide for Field Workers." This guideline provides a framework for PFA interventions that can be utilized by professionals and volunteers in the field (Bisson & Catrin, 2014). PFA has now become an integral part of disaster response in many countries worldwide. Various organizations, such as the WHO, International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and the American Psychological Association, have developed PFA programs and training to assist practitioners and volunteers in providing assistance to disaster victims.

Although proven effective in many contexts, implementing PFA in disaster response is not without its challenges. Research by L. M. Hobfoll et al. (2007) highlights that resource constraints and lack of adequate training can significantly impact the efficacy of PFA interventions. Moreover, the study by K. J. Bryant and C. E. Harvey (2017) emphasizes that cultural barriers and poor coordination among agencies further complicate PFA delivery. The work of R. J. Norris et al. (2008) reveals that effective implementation of PFA requires addressing these challenges through targeted training and better resource management. Additionally, the study by S. J. Jorm et al. (2018) underscores the importance of adapting PFA to local cultural contexts to improve its effectiveness. Understanding these opportunities and challenges is crucial for enhancing disaster response capacity. This research aims to provide valuable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to improve psychological interventions in crisis situations, identifying strategies and recommendations for enhancing overall disaster response capacity.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design:

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. The phenomenological approach enables a deep understanding of the experiences and perceptions of subjects related to the implementation of Psychological First Aid (PFA) in disaster response. According to Creswell (2013), a phenomenological study focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and aims to describe and interpret the essence of these experiences. This method is particularly suited for exploring how participants make sense of their experiences and the meanings they attribute to them.

Moustakas (1994) further emphasizes that phenomenological research involves in-depth interviews and data analysis to uncover the core themes of participants' experiences. By capturing the nuances of individuals' experiences with PFA, the study aims to provide insights into how these practices are perceived and implemented in real-world disaster scenarios. As van Manen (2014) notes, phenomenology helps to elucidate the fundamental structures of human experiences, thereby offering a richer understanding of the subjective realities faced by those involved in disaster response. This approach ensures that the research findings reflect the participants' authentic perspectives, leading to more meaningful conclusions about the efficacy and challenges of PFA in disaster contexts.

Location and Time of Study:

The research was conducted in several locations that had experienced previous disasters, including areas vulnerable to earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters. The research duration spanned six months, from June to November, coinciding with periods of frequent natural disasters in the region.

Subjects and Objects of Study

The subjects of the study consisted of various parties involved in disaster response and PFA implementation, including mental health workers, volunteers, social workers, and individuals who had experienced disasters. The object of the study was the experiences, perceptions, and practices related to the implementation of PFA in disaster situations.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via telephone, depending on the availability and preferences of the respondents. FGDs were held with groups comprising practitioners and individuals affected by disasters to obtain various perspectives on PFA implementation.

Validation of Data Authenticity

Data authenticity was ensured through several steps, including data triangulation (using multiple data sources), reflexivity (the researcher's reflection on their position and influence on the study), and participant validation (involving participants in the data interpretation process to ensure accuracy).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis approach. The analysis steps included data coding, identification of main themes and sub-themes, and development of narratives presenting the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

History and Basic Concept of PFA

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a formal approach that has been recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Red Cross, and the International Red Crescent since 2006. It emphasizes the importance of psychological intervention in disaster response, and it has become an internationally recognized framework for providing psychological assistance in crisis situations (WHO, 2011).

PFA is rooted in the principles of community mental health and recognizes the urgent need for simple and easily understood interventions in emergency situations. The basic concept of PFA focuses on active listening, providing emotional support, and directing individuals towards their own internal resources. This approach aims to reduce psychological distress, enhance adaptive functioning, and facilitate the natural recovery process from stress responses in crisis situations.

PFA also takes into account the diversity of cultures, values, and norms that may influence individuals' responses to disasters. It acknowledges the uniqueness of each individual and promotes empathetic emotional connections between the provider of assistance and the affected individual. PFA principles also include appreciation for the existing resources within the community and the affected individuals, as well as promoting strength-based and internally capacitated recovery.

According to the WHO (2011), Psychological First Aid (PFA) is fundamental, practical, and support-oriented care used to assist individuals experiencing stress due to disaster or crisis situations. PFA is provided rapidly after a disaster occurs, with an approach that is non-coercive and adapted to prevailing values. The focus of PFA is on providing practical, non-coercive support, identifying and meeting basic needs, listening without pressuring victims, creating a comfortable environment for victims, providing information about services and social support, and protecting victims from harm (WHO, 2011).

PFA is not an approach limited to mental health practitioners or specific professionals but can be carried out by community members involved in emergency response. PFA also differs from counseling, question-and-answer sessions, or psychological discussions aimed at analyzing the victim's condition. Instead, PFA is an alternative form of psychological discussion, in which victims can share their problems if they feel comfortable doing so. PFA is the first psychological assistance to disaster victims, aimed at making them feel comfortable, safe, calm, and hopeful.

The basic principles of PFA are illustrated through three main steps referred to as "look, listen, and link." The first step, "look," involves checking for serious distress reactions, ensuring the safety of victims, and meeting basic needs. The second step, "listen," involves approaching victims with empathy, asking about their needs, listening to their complaints, accepting all the feelings they express, and helping them feel calm. The final step, "link," involves assisting in meeting basic needs, accessing necessary services, providing accurate information, helping victims contact family or friends, and facilitating their access to social support (Farchi, et al., 2018).

Components and Principles of Psychological First Aid (PFA) Implementation

Psychological First Aid (PFA) involves eight core factors, including a commitment to assisting survivors, ensuring their safety and comfort, stabilizing their emotions, gathering information, providing practical assistance, building social connections, effectively managing crises, and connecting them with necessary future services. The elements of PFA consist of safety, calmness, connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope (Farchi, et al., 2018).

The principles of PFA implementation consist of three main actions to assist, namely Look, Listen, and Link. Look and Listen refer to efforts to understand and respond to the needs of disaster-affected victims by delving deeply into the situation.

There are several steps involved in PFA implementation, including:

1. **Preparation:** This stage involves acquiring basic knowledge about disasters, such as the types of disasters that may occur, the stages of response, and the needs and types of assistance required by victims. This helps PFA service providers to have sufficient understanding of the situation and be ready to face any challenges that may arise.
2. **Introducing Oneself and Initiating Contact:** It is crucial to build a trusting relationship between PFA service providers and victims. Service providers need to introduce themselves clearly, convey their purpose of presence, and offer assistance while maintaining confidentiality and respecting the victims' boundaries.
3. **Providing a Sense of Safety:** The primary focus is on creating a safe environment for victims and meeting their basic needs. Service providers need to remain calm and reassuring when interacting with victims, showing concern yet providing a reassuring presence. Providing a sense of safety helps reduce the stress and worries felt by victims, enabling them to more easily accept assistance and support.
4. **Encouraging Engagement:** This stage involves providing emotional support to victims, teaching simple stress management techniques, and assisting victims in connecting with available sources of assistance. Service providers need to take a sensitive approach to the needs of victims and not make assumptions about what they need. Directly asking victims about their needs and following up with appropriate actions is crucial in this step.
5. **Facilitating Recovery:** The final stage is facilitating the post-disaster recovery process for victims. This involves encouraging victims to actively participate in the recovery process, developing follow-up plans, and providing necessary support. Service providers can also help victims return to their pre-disaster routines, engage them in meeting their needs, and create opportunities for them to help and support each other (Farchi, et al., 2018).

In extremely severe situations, where victims experience significant difficulties, it is important to promptly seek direct professional care. This can assist in addressing more complex conditions and providing more specific assistance tailored to individual needs.

Opportunities and Challenges of Implementing PFA as First Psychological Aid in Disaster Mitigation

The implementation of Psychological First Aid (PFA) as the first psychological aid in disaster mitigation presents both opportunities and challenges that require attention. PFA can act as the first line of defense in preventing the emergence of more serious mental health problems in disaster victims. By providing timely and targeted psychosocial support, PFA can help victims cope with the stress, trauma, and uncertainty caused by disasters. PFA can also equip victims with coping strategies useful for managing emotions and overcoming the challenges they face, thereby enhancing their mental resilience in dealing with the psychological impacts of disasters.

Furthermore, PFA can be a gateway for disaster victims to access further mental health services needed. By providing appropriate interventions at the right time, PFA can help victims identify and address mental health problems that may arise post-disaster. Also, PFA can provide guidance and assistance in obtaining further treatment if needed. Additionally, PFA can build strong social support networks for disaster victims by engaging trained volunteers and healthcare professionals in providing emotional and practical support. Through this approach, victims can feel supported and connected to resources and support networks available in their communities.

However, PFA's implementation also faces various challenges that need to be addressed. One of the main challenges is the limitation of human and financial resources to train and provide PFA services to disaster victims in various areas. The lack of trained and skilled personnel in providing psychological support can hinder PFA efforts to achieve significant impact in reducing post-disaster mental health problems. Also, stigma and public misunderstanding of mental health issues can be barriers to the acceptance and implementation of PFA. Efforts to address stigma and raise awareness of the importance of mental health care in disaster situations are key to overcoming these challenges.

Other challenges include the availability of trained personnel ready to provide PFA services during disasters, as well as communication and cultural challenges that may arise in disaster contexts where there is cultural and linguistic diversity. In such situations, efforts are needed to ensure that PFA can be adapted to the needs and cultural beliefs of local communities, as well as provide effective communication and understanding of existing cultural values. Finally, evaluation and monitoring of the effectiveness of PFA interventions are also challenges, as they require coordinated monitoring systems and consistent data collection to accurately evaluate their impact.

By understanding these opportunities and challenges, more effective efforts can be made to enhance the implementation of PFA as an integral part of holistic and sustainable disaster response.

CONCLUSION

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a crucial approach in disaster management that aims to provide timely and comprehensive psychological assistance to individuals affected by disasters. It has great potential to improve the mental well-being of individuals and communities in crisis situations. Through PFA, we can increase awareness and understanding of the importance of mental health in disaster response and expand access to psychological services. It can also help strengthen community resilience and reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues. However, there are challenges that need to be addressed such as resource limitations, lack of

trained personnel, cultural and language barriers, inter-agency coordination, as well as resistance and ignorance. By addressing these challenges through inter-agency collaboration, comprehensive training, and a culturally sensitive approach, the implementation of PFA can become more effective and have a positive impact in mitigating the psychological effects of disasters. It is important to continue promoting the development and implementation of PFA as an integral part of holistic and sustainable disaster management efforts.

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