

Spiritual Care and Mental Health Services After South Taiwan Earthquake

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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The devastating earthquake on Feb. 6, 2016 in Tainan, Taiwan did more than the devastation of 117 killed and more than 500 people injured. It also caused heartache, guilt, regrets, anguish, and many other mix emotions for hundreds of affected families, just as they were preparing for the most important Chinese holiday of the year. Celebrations for Chinese New Year were canceled.

After the last body was found on Feb. 13th, a week after the initial quake, the search and rescue mission was officially over. Today, volunteers from Taiwan Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation are still working in the disaster area with survivors and impacted families with the focus on their mental health.

The Next Phase of Relief

Damaged homes can be rebuilt, but mental scars are hard to heal. People often find timely access to quality care remains out of reach, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized. If people are unable to access the health services they require, that can exacerbate their illnesses, ranging from moderate levels of anxiety to chronic, lifelong depression.

For example, Mr. Lin was worried about his elder brother's family. His brother and sister-in-law were both in the hospital recovering from serious injuries after being rescued. His brother suffered from severe spinal injuries, and his sister-in-law might lose her vision in her right eye due to her injuries. But their pain was more than the physical ones.

Their seven-year-old daughter's body was found four days after the earthquake with her face crushed beyond recognition. From the clothes she wore, Mr. Lin immediately recognized and identified his niece.

"I'm worried that my brother and his wife might not be able to face their daughter's death," he said quietly, after a Tzu Chi volunteer spent time with him and encouraged him to be strong for his family.

Post-Traumatic Mental Health Care Plan

Tzu Chi responded to the emotional needs of those affected with a comprehensive Post-Traumatic Mental Health Care Plan.

"Tzu Chi volunteers have been very kind," said Mrs. Tong, who managed to escape with her children from their home on the fifth floor of a collapsed building. "When we were saved by the rescuers and stepped onto the ground safely, I realized that we came out of the building without

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anything. All I had on was undershirt," she said. Tzu Chi volunteers immediately wrapped her in a blanket, protected her from the cold, and began helping her and her family to ease her worries.

A rescuer, Mr. Chuang, came to a Tzu Chi prayer service and shared his experience on stage about being one of the first to arrive at the disaster scene. After speaking just a few words, "the scene was heartbreaking", he broke down and was unable to continue. Mr. Tsai, another rescuer, took the microphone and explained, "We felt unbearable pain, because they were like our own families. We did our best but often without success, we were all grief-stricken at the end." This chance to share their thoughts openly really helps to relieve them of their post-traumatic stress.

To provide a holistic and comprehensive care for all those that are affected, this plan includes psychological support for survivors and families who are directly affected and also for rescue workers and general public. It began in the wake of the disaster and will continue throughout the recovery process, providing the necessary mental health care and support.



This plan includes the following seven aspects:

(1) Provide crucial mental relief and support

In the aftermath of the earthquake, Tzu Chi volunteers immediately went to the disaster area to provide mental and spiritual care for victims and their families in shelters, hospitals, and funeral homes. With a one-on-one approach, a care group has been established for each survivor to provide long-term care and create a sustainable support.

(2) Offer mental health services

With medical professionals from Tzu Chi hospitals, Tzu Chi University, and Tzu Chi International Medical Association, Tzu Chi continues to provide professional consultations to survivors, their families, rescue workers, volunteers, and general public.

(3) Support the rescue worker with love

The first-respondent and rescue workers often face tremendous physical and mental stress from long and intensive search and rescue. To support them, Tzu Chi provided energy-boosting hot meals and snacks 24 hours a day until the end of the search and rescue phase. In addition, Tzu Chi provided garments and equipment to help rescue workers warm and dry in the wintry weather. Furthermore, Tzu Chi hosted group events for the rescuers to discuss their emotions, relieve their stress, and rebuild their spirit during and after their search and rescue missions.

(4) Calm the public

Not all residents in the disaster area suffer from physical damages, but they can possibly suffer from anxiety and fear which are often overlooked. After the quake, groups of Tzu Chi volunteers and medical professionals went door to door in the affected areas, talked to residents, and

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listened to their concerns to comfort them and calm their anxiety. For families in needs, volunteers evaluated their needs and provided charity services.

(5) Deliver spiritual care

Disasters during special holidays can be detrimental, and therefore require further spiritual care to uplift the spirit. During the Chinese New Year holiday, Dharma masters from Jing Si Abode led global Dharma services through video-conference with more than 60,000 volunteers and attendees worldwide to pray for the victims and their families. Their prayers and love were felt by people suffering from the disaster; hopefully, this will help to reduce people's post-traumatic stress and deliver the affected community out of their sorrow and distress.

(6) Transform the post-traumatic experience

The road to full recovery can be very difficult. Therefore, Tzu Chi encourages survivors and rescuers to volunteer and help others by sharing their experiences in order to shorten their recovery time. By promoting deep contemplation and selfless giving, it is an opportunity for all to redefine their life's value and to encourage personal growth.

(7) Provide long-term care

By walking the long road to recovery with survivors, Tzu Chi volunteers and survivors become friends or even like a family. Establishing a long-term care is the most important factor to full recovery. Volunteers create individualized long-term care plans to help survivors deal with their emotional challenges and march toward a new life.

Statistics of Tzu Chi's Relief Distribution (as of March 3, 2016):

1. Volunteer shifts:

A total of 18,000 volunteer shifts, including 174 medical professionals, responded.

2. Hot meals:

A total of 23,500 hot meals served.

3. Other aid supplies:

664 Jing Si foldable beds, 2,000 eco-blankets, 560 scarves, 301 hats, 400 pairs of gloves, 3,591 packs of daily necessities, 117 spiritual music boxes, 272 prayer beads, 3 tonnes of Jing Si instant rice, and 2,600 light weight raincoats were distributed.

4. Emergency Cash:

Tzu Chi volunteers visited 293 hospitalized patients and 3,023 affected families. For those with urgent needs, more than 4.5 million TWD of emergency cash were distributed.

5. Prayer Events:

13 events were organized for a total of 4,166 attendees.

6. Mental Health Classes:

Five crisis response training for a total of 398 attendees.

