

Postquake Trauma

Mental health experts fear survivors may bear emotional scars long after their physical well-being has been restored

By CAMERON HAY

Step into any of the temporary shelters that now dot Kobe and a similar scene will confront you. Dozens of people, sitting and lying on the floor, often surrounded by makeshift cardboard barricades to give some sense of family space. Dozens of people, but near total silence.

The physical danger of the Great Hanshin Earthquake may have passed, and food, water, electricity and other basic provisions are, at last, reaching Kobe. But this silence could presage a new concern — that quake survivors may bear permanent mental scars of the trauma long after their lives appear to return to normal.

To prevent this from happening, mental health experts in the region have banded together to collect information on treating post-trauma stress, train counselors, and get them into the temporary shelters and treating victims.

While the traditional Japanese response to adversity is "gaman," or endurance, most mental health experts here believe survivors should be given a chance to talk about their pain.

According to Kelly Lemmon-Kishi of the Kansai International Association of Counselors and Psychotherapists, the aim of the counseling is to prevent post-traumatic stress (PTS) — the normal reaction to a disaster, such as an earthquake — from developing into post-traumatic stress syndrome, or longer term emotional scars.

After the earthquake hit Kobe, Lemmon-Kishi put out a request to U.S.-based mental-health-care experts for information on dealing with PTS after an earthquake. Within a week and a half, the responses had used up a second roll of fax paper, and Lemmon-Kishi began collating the information for use in Japan.

The 10-page handbook she produced identifies common signs of stress reactions: physical symptoms such as thirst and dizziness; cognitive symptoms such as nightmares and memory problems; emotional signs such as depression, irritability and guilt over surviving; and behavioral symptoms such as increased alcohol or tobacco consumption, withdrawal and excessive preoccupation with media coverage of the quake.

The handbook stresses that some stress is a normal reaction to a traumatic event, and that survivors must remember that they will heal and rebuild their lives, but that their lives will be different from what they were before the quake. The key is not to build a

"wall" around the pain, but to talk about the incident and its effects.

Apart from talking, the handbook recommends 28 ways to feel better, including exercising, keeping a journal, drawing or doing any other creative activity — especially for people who are not "artistic," getting plenty of rest, maintaining as normal a schedule as possible, gardening, hiking, baking bread and telephoning friends.

Family members and friends are advised not to tell survivors that they are "lucky it wasn't worse," but instead tell them how sorry they are, and that they want to help in any way they can. They should also give survivors private time, reassure them that they are safe, not take their anger or other feelings personally and contact a counselor if the person seems to be in trouble.

On Jan. 21, Lemmon-Kishi spoke to about 40 professional counselors at the Osaka YWCA, calling for a network of counselors to train volunteers to go into the worst hit areas of Hyogo Prefecture and treat survivors.

After the meeting, Sachie Shikano and Kim Kayuri of the Osaka YWCA, together with Yukiko Nishimura of the Osaka Suicide Prevention Center, quickly organized two training courses in Osaka, led by Takako Konishi, a psychiatrist at the Tokyo Medical and Dental University. One hundred thirty counselors attended.

"From these applicants we chose 60 counselors who must have both counseling experience and survival skills," said Shikano of the new group, Heart Care.

While about five of those selected dropped out after aftershocks hit Hyogo Prefecture, the first group of between 10 and 15 volunteers went into Ashiya on Jan. 28 and 29.

Based in Ashiya, members fanned out to meet and counsel survivors in their homes and temporary shelters for three days before returning to Osaka. Other groups followed.

The program, together with further training sessions at the YWCA, is expected to continue until the end of March. Study sessions will continue after that, with further activity planned to coincide with the one year anniversary of the quake, when media attention may cause survivors to have flashbacks, Shikano said.

"The most important things after the quake were water and supplies. But after that comes mental care. People must be helped to stand up again. Talking is good medicine," she said. (Jan. 29)