



The New Zealand Psychological Society

Te Rōpū Mātai Hinengaro o Aotearoa

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For immediate release

Attention: Science, Health and Social Issues Reporters

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The New Zealand Psychological Society would like to send a message of support to the community affected by the explosion in the Pike River mine. The distress of the friends and families of the missing miners touches all of us.

Traumatic events such as this understandably produce high levels of psychological distress amongst the families and workmates of the miners. In the initial stages of a disaster it is normal to feel a sense of shock and disbelief. As the impact sinks in, people may be overwhelmed by other strong feelings such as fear, anguish and anger. One of the most difficult feelings associated with a disaster is a sense of helplessness. In the Pike River mine explosion, this feeling would be heightened by the experience of waiting without any clear information about the missing miners. While obviously those who have loved ones amongst the missing miners are likely to be most affected, trauma ripples through whole communities and beyond as people struggle to take in what has happened and deal with their own feelings of distress and powerlessness.

Psychological research points to some strategies that may be helpful coping with the initial impact of a large-scale disaster such as this:

Social support is one of the most effective ways of helping people through a disaster. A crisis often brings out the strength and resilience of a community as people rally together to support one another. It is fortunate that the Pike River community and the wider mining community is a close and cohesive one, which is likely to be a strong protective factor for those involved.

Contact with other people undergoing similar experiences also provides an opportunity to talk through fears and share information. Psychological research has suggested that contact with friends and family is more helpful than contact with professionals in the early stages of a disaster, although professional help may be needed by some people at a later stage.

Disasters challenge people's beliefs that the world is secure and predictable. It is especially important for people dealing with disaster to be in a **safe and comfortable environment**. For those awaiting news of their loved ones it would be important to be in an environment in which they felt protected and well looked after.

Practical assistance is often needed for those who are involved in a disaster. When people are struggling with immediate shock they may need help with basic needs such as providing food, collecting clean clothes or taking care of children and pets. With their energy focused on the emotional demands of the situation it may be hard for them to attend to these issues.

To counteract the experience of helplessness it can be useful to encourage people to **do something to help**. This might be taking care of the emotional needs of others or organizing themselves into teams to address practical needs of others or for the community as a whole. Goal directed activity helps to re-establish a sense of self efficacy.

People in disaster situations need to have **as much information as is possible**. In the Pike River explosion there are obviously practical impediments to finding out the facts of the situation, but it may still be helpful for people to be given updated information on a predictable time table and to have clear channels for doing this. It may be useful for people to have regular updates even when no new information is available.

They also need to have knowledge about the **range of services** that are available to help them – both in the immediate situation and in the future. This provides a sense of security as well as hope that there will be assistance available afterwards if necessary. Because people often feel too shocked to take information in during a disaster it is helpful to provide written information in the form of cards or pamphlets.

Parents are naturally particularly concerned about the welfare of their **children** in disaster situations. Some may believe that children should be protected from knowledge about these situations but usually children are very good at registering distress in adults. It is often better to provide them with clear information which is appropriately adjusted to their level of understanding rather than leaving this to their imaginations; schools can be guided in this by the

Ministry of Education's traumatic incident team. In disaster situations children may benefit from being close to familiar adults to increase their sense of safety. They will also benefit from having some of the normal routines of life being kept reasonably constant such as school attendance, dinner time with their family, bed time stories, planned weekend activities and so on.

People outside of the immediate community may also experience a sense of distress and helplessness in response to the disaster. They often feel that they want to help in some way and are frustrated that they are unable to do this. While intrusions from outsiders would not necessarily be helpful for the community of Pike River, the opportunity to **donate money or to send messages of support** can be a useful way for them to express their concern and caring for those most directly affected by the disaster.

These suggestions however are intended only to facilitate an immediate coping. Different strategies may be required if longer term support is needed for those most affected by this disaster.

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Background to the New Zealand Psychological Society

The New Zealand Psychological Society is the largest professional association for psychologists in New Zealand. It has over 1000 members and subscribers and aims to improve individual and community wellbeing by representing, promoting and advancing the scientific discipline and practice of psychology. See www.psychology.org.nz for more information about the Society.