The Healing of Minds

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It's important to put into perspective the colossal impact that Cyclone Sidr had on our people. Thousands of people lost their lives during this natural disaster. Those who managed to survive lost their homes and their families. The process of rebuilding all that has been destroyed is a long and tedious one, if it does happen at all.

In addition to these more obvious effects, the victims of Sidr are also suffering from another side effect of the natural disaster that ruined their lives -- that of mental trauma, which is an aspect of medical and health care that most developing countries do not believe that they have the luxury to explore. The psychological trauma that victims of such disasters go through can sometimes scar them for life and prevent them from picking up the pieces and carrying on.

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We are a culture that shies away from any form of mental illness. Perhaps it is because like most other people, we fear the unknown. However, one of the main reasons cultures such as ours do not prioritise either the state of a single individual's or a collective nation's mental health is because we feel that there are 'bigger things to worry about.' In a nation where the majority of the population is starving and below poverty level, how relevant is people's mental wellbeing?

Dr. Raj Persaud, Consultant Psychiatrist at the Bethlem Royal and Maudsley Hospitals and Gresham Professor for Public Understanding of Psychiatry in the UK, believes that mental health is extremely relevant. He gives two different examples of how poor mental health affects a person's behavioural patterns, which can in turn affect a person's every day life. "If a fisherman, for example, after the cyclone, were to develop a phobia of water," he says, "he would in turn lose his livelihood. Also if one were to lose their child or family, the chances that they will not go for aid are higher. I also noticed that mothers who lost their sons were so devastated that they could not properly care for their daughters who are very much alive and need that care. It is imperative to work on people with these different mental traumas and try to bring them to a level where they can perform their daily functions.

"Another very interesting thing is that apparently, when the alarm sounded that the cyclone was coming people did not go to the shelters. Their whole attitude is that similar alarms have come before and nothing happened. It's these behaviour patterns that are linked with the study of mental health."

According to a research survey coordinated by the National Health Institute in Bangladesh, 16% of the population in Bangladesh suffers from some kind of mental disorder. The percentage went up to an alarming 80% after Cyclone Sidr. Dr. Persaud, also a programme presenter of the BBC Radio series, Travels of the Mind, recently visited the affected areas of South Bangladesh (Bagherghat), to oversee a 'psychosocial programme' administered by ActionAid, which in addition to providing health care, shelter and food like other organisations, is going the extra distance by also studying the effects that Sidr had on the mental state of the people in those areas.

According to ActionAid's press release about the programme entitled 'Mind care should find a priority for cyclone survivors' -- *ActionAid programme to address psychosocial needs of the survivors is expected to boost confidence and resilience*, "In the cyclone-hit areas,