

Healing the mind to heal the body

By Mei Jia (China Daily) Updated: 2010-01-27 08:04



Team members from China Earthquake Relief Project give a training session to local relief workers in Sichuan.

Courtesy of CHERP

Frightening images of the devastating Haitian earthquake have been flashing across TV screens in recent days. Experts have been cautioning against its traumatizing effects on survivors of the May 2008 quake in Sichuan province.

Recently, members of the China Earthquake Relief Project (CHERP) went back to Sichuan for the seventh time since July 2008 to check on both survivors and relief workers.

And last week, CHERP - which is funded by the United Family Hospitals, an international-standard healthcare organization in China - held a two-day conference in Beijing to share their experience of a new way of dealing with post-disaster trauma, called the Trauma Resiliency Model (TRM), with the capital's medical, counseling and relief personnel.

TRM is rooted in the belief that "the human body has an innate capacity to heal and restore itself".

"Talk therapy has its limitations," say Laurie Leitch and Elaine Miller-Karas, co-founders and co-directors of the US-based Trauma Resource Institute, which is one of the organizations participating in CHERP.

Both have 25 years of experience in trauma relief and say they have found that some quake survivors hesitate to talk about their pain as they believe it betrays a personal weakness.

"TRM relies not on talking but on the body's senses," Miller-Karas says. "People, no matter how different they might be, have the same nervous system, and this enables us to work in different cultures and work with people speaking different languages."

In Sichuan, Leitch, Miller-Karas and their team explained to the trainees that the body's suppressed energy in reaction to sudden trauma is what triggers the classic symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, such as nightmares, phobia and sleep problems and this further blocks the restoration of emotional balance.

"It's not their fault that they keep having stomachaches, headaches, nausea and numbness," Leitch says.

In TRM, trauma victims are guided to release their blocked energies through "tracking", or being acutely aware of signs of stress such as breathing heavily, a racy pulse ...; "grounding", whereby victims are encouraged to plant their feet firmly on the ground to regain their sense of safety; and "resourcing", which encourages victims draw strength from an emotionally tough and supportive role model and replenishing energies such as sunlight.

Victims are also encouraged to recall the trauma bit by bit ("titration"), and see which part of their body feels good and reference it to a part

that hurts ("pendulation"), with all of this finally culminating in an outpouring of emotions and release of energy.

Wu Wanfang, a Chengdu-based counselor, says TRM is "a very practical and easy-to-start treatment".

Wang is among 98 percent of the trainees who agree the TRM training will help not only in their work with earthquake survivors, but also firefighters, the police and university students.

TRM is also believed to reduce secondary trauma, and burn-out among relief workers.

"Relief workers work under great pressure," says Miller-Karas. "The training helps them to apply TRM skills to their own -care."

Even children, under parental guidance, can use TRM skills for stress relief.

Dr. Laurie Leitch and Elaine Miller-Karas, the co-founders of the Trauma Resource Institute stated that the longer-term goal of the Institute is to establish an Asian Disaster Training Institute so that information can be shared with all Asian countries.

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