

Article

How to strengthen communities in times of crisis

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EFPA Coronavirus position statement: How to strengthen communities in times of crisis

May 15, 2020

1. What is the crucial role of communities to cope with the crisis?
2. What can Community Psychology offer to help communities recover after the crisis?

In one of the most disruptive times in our societies there is no doubt that our 'sense of community' and our ability for mutual support may become a crucial factor how we will cope with a situation we never experienced before. This will be especially true for the weakest groups in our communities. But, in order to establish mutual support for the most vulnerable groups, one needs to maintain and nourish strong communities and a common sense of community.



EFPA would like to share some basic recommendations on the social effects on communities in relation to the Coronavirus spread. Community psychology can offer specialist competencies and tools that are useful for real problems both locally and on a global scale.

How do we strengthen our communities towards a challenge we never experienced before? In these times it is crucial to strengthen the bonds between people in communities. It is not only necessary to increase engagement in social welfare, but also to establish a sense of belonging and community between institutions, local business, cultural activists, volunteers, local governments and local media.

Communities are able to increase peoples' participation

Many communities immediately after the outbreak reacted in a variety of creative ways to help the vulnerable. It can help to address peoples' reasons for becoming involved. People need to feel that one's contribution is genuinely useful and helpful, and to have influence with an issue. People also need to have some level of control over self and environment, and to be recognised for one's efforts.

Involving the people who deal with it day to day, knowing the consequences, will make the contribution more meaningful and personal.

Participation and involvement is the feeling that it makes a difference to others what you do and what you don't do. But, especially in times of social distance, it may also be psychologically important that volunteers will be able to share their experiences with each other. Establishing a listserv and telephone hotline for volunteers and weekly online meetings in communities may be one option.

Communities can stimulate intersectoral collaboration

Intersectoral collaboration between institutions, initiatives and community groups will help to establish a strong sense of community ('we are not alone out there') or smaller sectors, that are common to most communities, like clinics, day care centres, clubs or associations, hospitals, housing authorities, libraries, neighbourhood groups, parent-teacher organisations, recreational groups, religious groups, service associations, social service agencies and veterans' groups. Communities need to address target groups with

an information strategy. These are civic organisations, grassroots organisations, school boards, labour unions, parent-teacher groups, church organisations, local media, local government officials.

Accessible and inclusive communities in times of crisis

Many communities increase communications between generations and within families and networks. Establishing telephone hotlines or sending postcards may be a small start, and can grow to strategic voluntary action.

Our social capital and culture of social responsibility are focused in times of crisis. What are the ways to develop intergenerational support? To help the elderly deal with the crisis it is important to keep them safe, while still making them connected and feeling useful to others. Help them find new and different ways to look after the youngest: establish a daily routine that connects grandparents with grandchildren. Active involvement in a social support network both during a disaster and after it, can bring psychological benefits to young people, e.g. strengthen self-esteem, increase sense of support from others, and increase feeling of self- and collective efficacy.

When building communities for future challenges, including the next pandemic, it will help to plan for sustainable social networks. In times when the health care units have fewer resources, communities need to plan for the inclusion of the poor, the elderly, the marginalised, the disempowered.

Communities can encourage bonding with family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. At home, at work, at school, in the neighbourhood. Encourage to think about these bonds as the cornerstones in life and invest time and care to develop them. Social bonds give support, comfort, joy and enrich everyday life. Neighbourhood solidarity is the key to deal with future challenges. Community psychology with its tools can contribute to revitalising neighbourhood to strengthen local solidarity and develop new forms of togetherness.

The Dugnad '**spirit of will to work together for a better community**' is an example from northern Europe that combines the local implicit knowledge with the power of togetherness* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communal_work#Norway).

This spirit is also found in the spontaneous volunteer actions we see in countries hardest hit by the Covid-19 virus (Italy, Spain and the UK).

Communities can strengthen the 'sense of community' facing isolation and social distance

An example of how this feels like would be; *"It seems to matter to others what I do. I have someone to share thoughts with, and they seem to know me, and will look after me when needed. I am not totally alone"* (Holte, 2017)*.

Sense of community is the feeling that you can share your thoughts, experiences and feelings with someone. That you matter to others, that they care for you, and will look after you when you need them. The sense that you are not alone.

These experiences may also be called sense of identity/place/community, self-respect/ empowerment, social capital/social group, and are rooted in peoples' psychological needs:

The feeling that you are somebody in your own right and with your own value. That you feel part of something bigger than yourself, that somebody needs you. It could be your family, friends, the kindergarten, school, neighbourhood, work place, or an organisation.

The feeling that you are good at something, that you can contribute with a skill. The feeling that you belong to someone and to a place that feels like your own. The feeling that you can think, feel and act without being afraid. If peoples' sense of community is to be strengthened,

communities need to develop (virtual) meeting places in our everyday lives; the kindergarten, school, work place, neighbourhood, volunteer work, cultural and leisure activities.

A strong sense of community is celebrating the community's capacity for collective help to individuals. A sense of being a resource for ones' neighbourhood.

Building resilience through co-productive practice and co-creation

Improving community resilience, both in the face of immediate threat, and in relation to sustainable forms of public wellbeing, is dependent on a high level of trust between authorities and citizens. Nourishing community members' sense of being key stakeholders in the collective measures to prevent the virus from spreading, will help to build trust.

Building a sense of/ trust in our community takes into account the implicit local knowledge and skills of community members to build new ways of understanding the networks of communities we are part of. Building trust and solidarity is a long-term process, involving public and private sectors.



In this process of generating confidence it is important that *the strength* of network assets can be readily mobilised. Communities should also address the gaps in which vulnerability to loneliness and isolation can occur- *their weaknesses*.

Community regeneration after the crisis

Communities in many countries are amazingly active to strengthen their feeling of belonging and build new forms of community. Helping to preserve the treasure of engaged, creative and home-grown ideas and 'pop-up'-solutions will be important if we want to maintain the sense of community and co-creation which is emerging in our societies.

Crucial in a moment at which face-to-face relationships may have been severed, the longer-term impact of building solidarity in this way is likely to be of key importance for the development of more cohesive communities. Communities are advised to improve the scope for replenishing the future social fabric and public domain. A partnership of public services and local people which synthesises the assets of both, can be a source of reciprocity and mutual support into the future.

Local institutions play a key role. They can give voice to community fears and concerns and establish with them solutions to deal with their problems. Experts should be involved in the process, making sure that the information that is needed is available. A plan to deal with future pandemics/threats should be prepared involving different stakeholders including community members. The capacity that communities have shown during the crisis should be the basis for reinventing public services. Local community-based health partnerships should be supported and nurtured, based on evidence collected from capacity of decentralised health services to manage and contain the pandemic. Community psychologists could support the development and management of community-based health partnerships.

Regeneration includes re-establishing a different connection with our natural environment. It is important to help people to recognise the importance of the natural environment for people's wellbeing and develop people's awareness about the importance and the opportunities to adopt a more sustainable approach to our local environment. Many citizens have experienced new ways of enjoying their environment for walks and recreation during the pandemic. This has made a strengthened connection possible.

Incorporate social responsibility and citizenship competencies in educational programs

The public educational programs in schools could aim at supporting psychological and social well-being, thereby re-inventing the educational environment. Participatory projects, allowing children and young people to explore their feeling, fears and emotions would be important. It would be important to take the opportunity to reflect with young people on how to re-establish a new togetherness in peer groups and in the community, and discuss with them about civic responsibilities. The post-emergency could be an opportunity to strengthen citizenship competences thorough experiential learning. Service-Learning could be helpful in this sense in primary, secondary and higher education, offering also ways to identify new sites for education (thus supporting the necessity to qualify education as well as maintain safety measures and distancing).

In places that have been strongly hit by the pandemic, with high rates of mortality and suffering, one of the main goals for intervention at school level would be to restore children's sense of security, emotional stability, and create opportunities for positive development. Interventions could be carried out in all classes to enable children to understand the causes of the pandemic, to express unpleasant thoughts and feelings, as well as to teach positive coping styles in order to develop a sense of control. Many children with learning disabilities and special needs have lost their usual support during the crisis. Communities and schools need to identify groups of children with special needs to foster their development and learning abilities.

Nourishing a community memory will build community strengths and resilience

Community psychologists can help to establish a 'community memory' for the time of societal recovery after the crisis. Therefore, community psychologists in Europe, together with their colleagues in the US, are collecting ideas, creative moments, individual and collective experiences and models of good practice in a 'New Bank of Community Ideas and Solutions'. Common memories from our newly developed sense of community will be the treasure which can be used to re-build our future communities and societies to be more resilient and inclusive. See the survey and results at <http://www.ecpa-online.com/>

Another resource bank has been set up as a Drop box for Community Psychology interventions and new tools for coping with the Covid-19 in Europe; https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kDG-QtUZrklzmtM6ra_IeEz7I4zd1Ch1Waan5-9X_D0/edit

This crowdsourcing document is a Community Psychology Resource of Interest in relation to the Coronavirus Pandemic, and will be updated as new examples are added.

Taking care of individual and collective well-being

During the crisis people can experience a lot of fear and anger. Isolation and worries about health bring the risk of establishing "social distance" as a new structural relational measure. It is important to maintain discussions about fears and worries, in order to help people, negotiate the need for protection with the need for a creative and social life. Communities can help people to recognise the multidimensionality of well-being, and support people's capacity to master and give a meaning to the situation they have experienced. This could be done by collecting "successful narratives" and write collective narratives that could help people cope with adversities. Collective reflections on how societal and individual values are challenged by crisis could be supported. Based on these reflections new pacts of togetherness could be developed.



It is important to help those who have lost relatives to have collective places to elaborate their loss by recognising the communities' collective rituals.

Including a gendered perspective in the post-pandemic agenda, re-valuing “reproductive work”

There is evidence across the world that pandemic and global crises tend to increase inequality. For women who in western societies provide most of the informal care within families, this may have implications. Their work and economic opportunities may be reduced, increasing the amount of unpaid and caregiving work. It would be important for communities to consider these gender-related specific needs, by including women in decision making for the post-pandemic response. Community psychologists could give a significant contribution in three critical area of activities for the adoption of a gendered perspective:

- Advocacy and activism: Collaborate with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), support centres and organisations that work for gender equality.
- Develop engaged participatory research that incorporate the perspectives of women on the pandemic and its consequence, allowing them to have a voice and using their competences (leadership, creativity) to design the post Covid-19 scenario.
- Support caregiving services (for victims of interpersonal violence (IPV), for caregivers) and supportive (informal) communities

*Holte, Arne (2017) <https://www.psykologforeningen.no>

This information has been prepared by EFPA’s Standing Committee for Community Psychology, edited by its Convenor Nicholas Carr, in collaboration with ECPA (European Community Psychology Association Board)

The European Federation of Psychologists’ Associations (EFPA) represents psychologists’ associations across 39 European countries and some 350,000 psychologists. EFPA brings together Europe’s experts in Community Psychology in its Standing Committee for Community Psychology.

<http://efpa.eu>

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