

Factsheet

Health and psychological wellbeing

The situation of older people in cyclone-affected Myanmar

Nine months after Nargis: Lessons learnt from relief programme research in three affected townships



The wide-ranging impacts and losses created by natural disasters directly affect people's health and psychological wellbeing. Among older people affected by cyclone Nargis, post-traumatic symptoms persist, as do fears and insecurities about the future.

“I have never faced such things before... I was so sad that I wanted to die. I was frightened at this moment, all the houses and trees were destroyed. We saved our lives by going to the monastery or by climbing up trees.”

woman aged 63, Bogale

Older people's accounts of their traumatic experiences during and immediately after cyclone Nargis highlighted the speed and scale of destruction and the shock they felt in its wake.

The depression felt by many after the cyclone was followed by mixed experiences, but generally included an improved sense of wellbeing during the arrival and provision of relief assistance. Many older people today express both positive feelings about their current situation and anxiety about the future.

Nine months after Nargis struck, the general state of health appears to have stabilized for the majority of older people, although many report an increase in health problems with potential psychological causes, such as high blood pressure, headaches or respiratory problems, and an increase in chronic joint pain.

Cyclone Nargis was a massive shock for older people, both physically and psychologically. Respondents clearly recall the loss of lives, the shortage of food and water, the loss of their homes, and the sudden loss of their sense of security.

The general state of health now appears to have stabilized for the majority of older people, although many predictably report an increase in conditions with a possible psychological connection.

When older people were asked about their recent health problems, chronic pain was the most common complaint, followed by non-specific fever or high blood pressure. Respiratory problems and diarrhoea were each reported by almost one-in-five respondents, with headache and gastritis also mentioned.



“During the cyclone it was as if the world had ended... Everyone seemed to lose their minds. I didn’t eat anything for two days I felt so terrible.”

Additional health services, in particular the mobile medical units introduced after Nargis, were especially welcomed. According to respondents, these health services were easy to access and free of charge, and provided substantial support for older people.

In the two project townships where HelpAge mobile medical units operated, the vast majority of older people (94 per cent) described unit staff as aware of their needs.

A special set of questions were used to assess the psychological wellbeing of respondents. Significant differences were seen between townships, with a clear indication that wellbeing was closely linked to the relative impact of the cyclone on livelihood situations in a given setting.

Over two-thirds of older people stated that they worried about the future often or most of the time, while just under half reported that they were anxious about another cyclone. Almost a quarter of older people worry often/most of the time that they are a burden to the family and the same proportion often/most of the time feel so unhappy they could cry.

Facts revealed by current research

- The considerable destruction of health services by the cyclone is a priority concern for older people.
- Just under half report that they are anxious about another cyclone.
- Around one-in-four older people worry often/most of the time that they are a burden to their family.
- Approximately 50 per cent report that they have less appetite than before the cyclone.
- Less than one-third of older people reported satisfaction with staff of health services in townships where these did not specifically include the needs of older people.
- According to respondents, the most important factor influencing psychological wellbeing in this emergency was the provision of material support.

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