

## SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL GUIDANCE IN UNEXPECTED PUBLIC CRISIS EVENTS

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### ABSTRACT

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Sudden public crises often trigger widespread anxiety, panic, and uncertainty among the public, posing a challenge to social stability. Therefore, social psychological guidance becomes a crucial component of emergency management systems. Its core objective is to alleviate individual psychological crises, maintain social order, and enhance collective psychological resilience through scientific intervention. Effective guidance should adhere to five key principles: enhancing a sense of security by reducing fear of the unknown through timely and transparent information dissemination; promoting calmness and helping the public manage their emotions; strengthening self-efficacy and collective efficacy to inspire confidence in positive coping; reinforcing social connections and leveraging family and community support; and conveying hope to guide the public towards maintaining positive expectations. Main strategies include establishing psychological support hotlines, disseminating mental health information, utilising media for positive public opinion guidance, and implementing multi-level, comprehensive psychological intervention services. Practical experience demonstrates that systematic social psychological guidance not only mitigates psychological trauma but also enhances social governance effectiveness, providing solid support for crisis response and recovery.

**Keywords:** *Public Crisis, Social Psychological Guidance, Emergency Management, Psychological Resilience, Social Stability, Crisis Intervention, Social Governance.*

### INTRODUCTION

With rapid social development, various contradictions and conflicts are accumulating, posing immense challenges to human survival, and leading to frequent and widespread public emergencies. Major public emergencies such as natural disasters, accidents, public health crises, and social security incidents can trigger mass crises, causing severe psychological traumas to the general public. If these group psychological problems are not addressed promptly, they can lead to large-scale petitions and mass incidents, becoming factors of social instability. Therefore, psychological crisis intervention has become not only an important method alongside life-saving and material assistance, but also a symbol of a nation's commitment to humanitarian care. The characteristics of group psychological crises triggered by emergencies determine that psychological crisis intervention is a long-term and arduous undertaking that must be given high priority, in which the leading role of the government is crucial.

#### I. Background and Importance of Social Psychological Guidance in the Context of Public Crisis Events

Sudden public crises typically refer to emergencies that occur suddenly within a short period of time and pose a serious threat to social order, public safety, and people's lives and property.

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These include natural disasters (such as earthquakes and floods), public health events (such as infectious disease outbreaks), and social security incidents (such as terrorist attacks and major accidents). These events are often characterised by their suddenness, uncertainty, strong destructive power, and wide-ranging impact. They not only directly affect the physical and mental health of individuals but also have a profound impact on the psychological environment of the entire society. In the early stages of a crisis, the public often experiences negative emotions such as panic, anxiety, and fear due to information asymmetry and heightened risk perception. If these emotions are not addressed promptly, they can escalate into a large-scale social psychological crisis, affecting social stability and hindering the effective implementation of emergency management efforts.

In the context of public health emergencies, the importance of social psychological guidance becomes increasingly prominent. Firstly, psychological guidance helps stabilise public emotions and reduce irrational behaviour. After a crisis event, people facing unknown risks are prone to cognitive biases, such as exaggerating threats, believing rumours, or taking extreme measures like panic buying or blindly fleeing. Effective psychological guidance, through the timely release of authoritative information and the dissemination of scientific knowledge, helps the public develop a rational understanding of the risks, reduce panic levels, and enhance coping abilities.

Secondly, psychological guidance is crucial for maintaining social order. When public emotions are stable and social trust is maintained, the government's emergency management measures can be implemented more smoothly, thereby improving overall response efficiency. Furthermore, psychological guidance can promote social cohesion. During a crisis, individuals are prone to feelings of isolation and helplessness, but through psychological support and emotional connection, the sense of mutual assistance among social members can be strengthened, forming a collective force to overcome challenges.

In recent years, several major public crises worldwide have highlighted the necessity of social psychological guidance. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic that erupted in 2020 was not only a public health crisis but also triggered widespread social and psychological impacts. Residents in many countries exhibited high levels of anxiety and uncertainty in the early stages of the pandemic, with some even developing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Against this backdrop, governments and professional institutions in various countries have implemented psychological intervention measures, such as establishing mental health hotlines, providing online psychological counselling, and publishing mental health guidelines, to alleviate public psychological stress.

During the pandemic, my country also placed great importance on psychological support, with the National Health Commission issuing the "Guidelines for Emergency Psychological Crisis Intervention during the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia Epidemic" to guide local authorities in providing psychological assistance services. These practices demonstrate that social psychological guidance is not only an important component of crisis management but also a crucial link in enhancing social governance capabilities. Therefore, in the context of sudden public crises, building a scientific, systematic, and efficient social psychological guidance mechanism has become an indispensable part of modern social governance systems.

## **II. The Impact of Public Health Emergencies on Public Psychology**

The psychological impact of sudden public crises on the public is multifaceted and far-reaching, primarily manifesting at both the individual and group levels.

At the individual level, crisis events often trigger a series of stress responses, including emotional, cognitive, and behavioural changes. The most common emotional responses are anxiety, fear, and helplessness. When individuals face sudden threats, the brain's stress system is activated, leading to increased levels of stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, putting them in a state of heightened alertness. While this physiological response is helpful in the short term for individuals to quickly cope with danger, if it persists for too long, it can lead to chronic anxiety, insomnia, irritability, and other psychological problems.

For example, in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people experienced excessive worry, repeatedly measured their temperature, and frequently disinfected surfaces due to concerns about infection risk, even developing generalised anxiety disorder. Furthermore, some individuals may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after experiencing a major crisis, exhibiting symptoms such as recurrent flashbacks of the traumatic event, avoidance of related stimuli, and emotional numbness, severely impacting their daily lives.

At the cognitive level, crisis events alter individuals' risk perception and information processing methods. Because crises are often accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty, the public, lacking sufficient information, tends to rely on intuitive judgments rather than rational analysis, leading to cognitive biases. For example, people may overestimate their likelihood of being threatened, developing "catastrophising thinking," believing that the worst-case scenario is inevitable. Furthermore, confirmation bias is particularly evident during crises; individuals tend to accept information that confirms their anxieties while ignoring contradictory evidence, further exacerbating panic. For instance, in public health emergencies, some people may focus more on media reports of severe cases and death statistics, while neglecting recovery rates and the effectiveness of prevention and control measures, thus forming a one-sided perception of the risk. This cognitive distortion not only affects individual decision-making but can also lead to irrational behaviours, such as hoarding supplies and refusing to cooperate with epidemic prevention policies.

At the group level, sudden public crises can trigger collective psychological effects, amplifying and reinforcing individual emotions through social transmission. The most typical group psychological phenomenon is "herd behaviour", where individuals tend to imitate the behaviour of others in uncertain situations to seek a sense of security. For example, in the early stages of the pandemic, when some people started hoarding masks and disinfectants, this behaviour quickly spread on social media, leading to widespread stockpiling and causing market supply shortages. Furthermore, group polarisation is also a common psychological phenomenon during crises, where the initial tendencies of group members are further reinforced during discussions, leading to more extreme viewpoints. For instance, in online communities, discussions about vaccine safety might evolve from initial caution to complete refusal of vaccination, exacerbating the difficulties of pandemic control efforts.

In addition to conformity and polarisation, the spread of rumours is another important manifestation of group psychological influence. In situations of information opacity or delayed official responses, the public's fear of the unknown prompts them to seek explanations, and unverified information often spreads rapidly due to its dramatic and emotionally impactful nature. For example, during the SARS and COVID-19 pandemics, various rumours about the origin, transmission routes, and treatment methods of the virus circulated widely, not only misleading the public but also potentially undermining government credibility. Furthermore, fluctuations in social trust also affect group psychology. When public trust in the government,

medical institutions, or the media declines, people are more likely to rely on informal information channels, increasing the risk of misunderstanding and panic. Therefore, sudden public crises not only affect individual psychological states but also shape the collective psychological atmosphere through social interaction mechanisms, posing challenges to social stability and crisis management.

### **III. Basic Principles of Social Psychological Guidance**

In the context of public health emergencies, effective psychosocial guidance must adhere to the five internationally recognised principles of psychological first aid to help the public establish a sense of safety, maintain emotional stability, enhance coping abilities, strengthen social connections, and maintain hope. These principles not only form the core framework of psychological intervention but also provide scientific guidance for the actions of governments, media, and social organisations in crisis management.

First, promote a sense of security. In the early stages of a crisis, the public often experiences panic due to information asymmetry and environmental uncertainty. Therefore, the primary task is to enhance individuals' sense of security through various means. This includes providing accurate and timely information to help the public understand the true situation and the potential scope of risks, thus preventing anxiety from being exacerbated by speculation and rumours. At the same time, family and community support systems are crucial, as stable interpersonal relationships can enhance an individual's psychological resilience. Furthermore, developing clear coping plans, such as specific protective measures, emergency supply plans, and guidelines for seeking medical attention, can help reduce fear of the unknown and increase a sense of control over the situation.

Secondly, promoting calmness is crucial. The public in a crisis situation is often highly stressed, and prolonged anxiety can impair judgment and decision-making abilities. Therefore, psychological guidance should help individuals manage their emotions and avoid excessive stress responses. The government and professional organisations can guide the public in managing stress by publishing clear and easy-to-understand mental health guidelines, including relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and mindfulness meditation. The media should avoid sensationalising fear and instead convey information in a rational and objective manner to help the public remain calm. Furthermore, establishing mental health hotlines and online counselling platforms to provide immediate support to individuals in need is also an important measure to promote calmness.

Third, promote self-efficacy and collective efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to cope with a crisis, while collective efficacy involves the belief that a group can overcome difficulties together. Psychological guidance should emphasise the existing resources and capabilities of the public, for example, by disseminating scientific knowledge about prevention and control, allowing people to understand that taking the right measures can effectively reduce the risk of infection, thereby enhancing their sense of control. At the same time, encouraging community mutual assistance, volunteerism, and collective collaboration can strengthen social cohesion and instil confidence that "we can overcome difficulties together." For example, during the pandemic, community-organised initiatives such as food delivery and neighbourhood support groups not only addressed practical problems but also boosted collective confidence in responding to the crisis.

Fourth, promote connection. Social support is a key factor in psychological recovery; therefore psychological guidance should focus on strengthening interpersonal connections.

Governments and communities can organise mental health lectures, support groups, or interactive activities through online platforms to help individuals reduce feelings of loneliness. Communication and emotional support among family members are equally important; encouraging people to share their feelings and listen to each other helps alleviate psychological stress. Furthermore, the media should disseminate positive stories, such as the dedication of healthcare workers and acts of mutual support among ordinary people, to enhance social trust and a sense of belonging.

Fifth, promote hope. Even in the most severe crises, psychological guidance should help the public maintain confidence in the future. This can be achieved by setting achievable short-term goals, reviewing successful historical responses, and emphasising the effectiveness of scientific advancements and control measures. For example, during the peak of an epidemic, the government can help the public see hope by releasing positive information such as progress in vaccine development and rising recovery rates. At the same time, encouraging people to find meaning in difficult times, such as through volunteer work and documenting stories of resilience during the crisis, can enhance psychological resilience and a positive mindset.

By following these five principles, social psychological guidance can not only effectively alleviate short-term psychological stress among the public but also enhance the overall psychological resilience of society, laying a solid foundation for crisis response and post-disaster recovery.

#### **IV. Approaches to Social Psychological Intervention in the Context of Public Emergencies**

##### **Government Leadership and Scientifically and Effectively Countering Rumours**

In the event of a public emergency, the government must play a leading role, guiding public opinion in an open, transparent, and scientific manner to effectively curb the spread of rumours.

First of all, it is necessary to respond quickly and release true information in a timely manner. The vacuum of information is a hotbed for the breeding of rumours. The government should release the truth, progress and response measures of the incident through authoritative channels such as press conferences, official bulletins, and government new media at the first time, so as to "seize the initiative in public opinion" and occupy the commanding height of public opinion. At the same time, it is necessary to smooth the communication channels with the public, actively respond to social concerns, listen to public opinions, reflect humanistic care, and avoid panic caused by information asymmetry.

Secondly, scientific guidance should be provided to maintain the credibility of the media. The government should rely on the authority and influence of mainstream media to make them the "guiding stars" of online public opinion. During major events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government, through continuous and authoritative coverage by mainstream media, effectively guided the direction of public opinion, clarified false information, shaped an image of an open, transparent and responsible government, and greatly enhanced public trust.

Finally, we should be candid and shape the image of a responsible government. Crisis response is a comprehensive test of the government's governance capacity. The government must have a sense of crisis, remain calm in the face of danger, and face the public with sincerity, composure and a responsible attitude. This requires government staff to be courageous in taking on responsibilities, always uphold the concept of "people-oriented", and prioritise the

protection of people's lives and health, so as to win the hearts of the people in times of crisis.

### **Improve the construction of psychological intervention institutions and systems**

"Preventing trouble before it happens" is the best strategy for crisis management. Establishing and improving the social psychological service system is the institutional guarantee for achieving long-term social stability and security. Emergencies can severely impact the psychological sense of security of the public. Therefore, psychological counselling must be incorporated into the emergency management system. A four-in-one psychological service mechanism integrating "publicity and guidance, education and tutoring, service management, and volunteer service" should be established. The key point is to enhance psychological counselling and implement classified intervention. Smooth communication channels and enhance humanistic care; popularise psychological knowledge and guide the public to respond rationally; and provide precise care for key groups.

### **Provide regular psychological assistance and self-help technique guidance to leading cadres**

Leading cadres are the "command centres" in crisis response, and their psychological quality is of vital importance. First, we need to enhance regular training. Incorporate psychological crisis intervention techniques into the cadre training system. For instance, popularise the ABC method for rapid psychological crisis intervention (safety, calmness, connection), eye movement desensitisation technology (EMDR), and stabilisation techniques (such as "safe island" and "safe box" techniques), etc., to help cadres stabilise their emotions under pressure and enhance their self-adjustment ability.

Second, we should promote the transformation of aid from "assistance from others" to "self-help". Heroic deeds in disaster relief should be vigorously publicised to inspire people with the power of role models. Focus on training grassroots teachers and community workers to make them the "first responders" of mental health education. Incorporate life education and crisis self-rescue education into regular education to enhance psychological resilience from the source. Establish a psychological assistance experimental zone to conduct long-term follow-up intervention for the disaster-stricken people and help them rebuild their sense of security.

Third, we should guide the masses to regulate themselves. Psychological knowledge should be popularised to guide the public to have a correct understanding of crises and overcome fear. Learn stress-relieving techniques and manage emotions; Keep hope and confidence. Encourage people to spend more time with their families, read books, do sports, engage in meaningful activities and seek professional help proactively when necessary.

### **Establish and improve the social psychological service system**

The construction of a social psychological service system aims to cultivate a social mentality characterised by self-respect, self-confidence, rationality, calmness, and positivity.

First, it is necessary to unify thinking and strengthen publicity. Through all-media channels, we will deepen the popularisation of mental health knowledge and create an atmosphere where the whole society cares about mental health.

Second, we need to cultivate three service teams: an expert "think tank", a full-time "main force", and a volunteer "new force", forming a service network that combines professional support with social participation.

Third, we should build a four-level service platform. Establish and improve psychological

service guidance centres (stations) at the municipal, district/county, township (sub-district), and village (community) levels to ensure effective coverage of platforms at all levels and equip them with professional personnel as required.

Finally, we need to improve five working mechanisms. First, the daily investigation and evaluation mechanism, which incorporates psychological services into grid management. Second, the monitoring and early warning mechanism, which implements a "three-color (red, yellow, green) level warning" for special groups. Third, the psychological counselling mechanism, which adopts "targeted measures based on individuals" for key groups such as those who are frustrated in life or have unbalanced mentality. Fourth, the crisis intervention mechanism, which involves formulating emergency plans to prevent extreme incidents. Fifth, the "3 + 1" service extension mechanism, which organically integrates conflict resolution, legal aid, assistance and support with psychological counselling.

At the same time, guarantees should be strengthened. Establish an organisational system of "party and government leadership, political and legal leadership, health and family planning as the mainstay, departmental cooperation, and social participation". Strengthen policy support, cultivate social organisations through government purchase of services; expand funding sources; strengthen training and supervision to improve the professional level of the team.

### **Strengthen the building of professional teams**

China's mental health services are confronted with a prominent contradiction of "huge demand" and "insufficient supply", and it is an urgent task to strengthen the construction of professional teams. First, mental health knowledge should be widely popularised. Eliminate the public's misunderstandings and "stigma" about mental health issues and regard them as equally important as physical health. Through various channels, extensive publicity should be carried out in communities, schools and units, especially by seizing the opportunities such as the "May 25<sup>th</sup> Mental Health Day" and "World Mental Health Day" to intensify publicity efforts. Special attention should be paid to mental health education for minors.

Second, we should strengthen the cultivation of professional talents. Mental health legislation should be improved, and a strict professional qualification system should be established. Equally, strengthen the construction of disciplines such as psychiatry and clinical psychology in colleges and universities and cultivate professional talents. Integrate high-quality resources from hospitals, universities and research institutes, unite social work forces, recruit professional volunteers, expand the service team and conduct systematic training.

Third, it is necessary to improve the functions of the service team. Establish a multidisciplinary team composed of psychiatrists, psychotherapists and psychological counsellors to provide professional services. Attach importance to the construction of the medical social worker team and give full play to their role in doctor-patient communication and psychological support. Guide volunteers to carry out basic services such as psychological comfort and companionship support and form a multi-level service system.

### **Improve the social support system and strengthen organisational construction**

Maintaining citizens' mental health requires the joint efforts of the government, society, families and individuals. First, a rational and peaceful social atmosphere should be created. Establish a psychological early warning and emergency support mechanism for unexpected incidents, incorporate psychological intervention into the entire process management, and

systematically mitigate the impact of crises. Second, we should enhance mental health services for leading cadres. Caring for the physical and mental health of cadres is an important task of the Party. It should be systematically advanced from aspects such as systems and funds to ensure that they can receive timely psychological support under high pressure. Third, we should guide cadres to enhance their self-cultivation. Incorporate the construction of psychological capabilities into the cadre training system to help cadres eliminate the "stigma of illness" and learn to adjust themselves. Fourth, we must strengthen family and social support. Family affection and friendship are the "first line of defence" against crises. It is necessary to advocate for positive communication among family members and encourage them to confide in relatives and friends when in difficult situations.

At the same time, it is necessary to guide the public to actively seek professional help when necessary. In psychological intervention, it is necessary to comprehensively utilise peer counselling, family support and other means to build a solid and warm social support network composed of families, communities and professional institutions, jointly promoting the healthy development of citizens' psychology.

Although social psychological guidance has achieved results in public emergencies, it still faces challenges in terms of mechanisms, resources and technological application. At present, most psychological interventions are emergency responses and lack a regular mechanism. Services are prone to interruption after crises. In the future, they should be incorporated into the national emergency management system, and a long-term support network should be established. The shortage of professional talents and the uneven distribution of resources are prominent. The service coverage rate in grassroots and remote areas is low, and it is difficult for the elderly, rural residents and other groups to obtain assistance. It is urgent to strengthen talent cultivation and promote service penetration.

Technology offers new paths for psychological guidance. Artificial intelligence can assist in psychological screening, big data can monitor public sentiment, and remote platforms can break through geographical restrictions. We should promote the deep integration of technology and psychological services and build an intelligent and precise support system. In addition, public crises often have a transnational nature. It is necessary to enhance international cooperation, share intervention guidelines, training resources and response models, and improve global psychological resilience.

At the same time, interdisciplinary research in psychology, sociology, communication studies and public health should be deepened to improve theory and practice. In conclusion, social psychological guidance is of vital importance in alleviating anxiety, curbing rumours and maintaining stability. In the future, efforts should be made in a coordinated manner to promote the normalisation of mechanisms, the equalisation of resources, the intelligence of technologies and the internationalisation of cooperation, so as to comprehensively enhance the psychological support capacity in crisis response.

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