

Context and relevance of the project

The IASC MHPSS RG is a technical body at the international level to coordinate humanitarian actions. One of its primary roles is to plan, establish and coordinate multisectoral responses to protect, support and improve the mental health and psychosocial well-being of adults and children during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The Reference Group consists of 60 member organizations and 10 donors across 50 countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a protracted emergency and has impacted the well-being of every individual, regardless of age, profession or background. Therefore, the IASC MHPSS RG developed a guide to equip a wide range of audiences with basic psychosocial skills to manage their mental health and well-being. The guide also shows how to assist others, including work colleagues, through effective communication and evidence-based recommendations. The guide does not include medical or pharmacological advice.

Summary of the analysis



Innovation factors

While the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the well-being of us all, it has also been a remarkable period of solidarity. So many people wanted to step forward and be a part of the response. At the same time, relief providers involved in the COVID-19 response needed to be equipped with basic psychosocial support skills, whether they were trained in providing such support or not. The Basic Psychosocial Skills guide orients people on how to be an active listener, speak with empathy, respect others' emotions, and provide appropriate advice when someone is struggling with difficult emotions.

The guide is an innovative way to communicate science as it uses illustrations, similar to a comic book, to engage readers from various educational backgrounds in acquiring the basic psychosocial skills. Further, the guide was developed with extensive input from potential end-users, which makes it useful and relevant for the target audience. The design team ensured a practice-oriented approach by using images and simple messages that resonate with daily life experiences. A variety of contexts and settings are represented such as working as a community leader, a nurse, a care-provider in a refugee setting, or simply supporting an older neighbour or a colleague.

Case studies and tips to remember the recommendations are included throughout the guide. Additionally, the annex compiles:

- 1) advice for managers and supervisors to support the well-being of staff and volunteers;
- 2) a chart for daily routines, in which users can insert an activity and an associated time, to organize their day better;
- 3) a diagram for control circles, where users can identify and distinguish problems that they can do something about and those that they cannot;
- 4) a set of muscle relaxation exercises to manage stress; and
- 5) a grid in which users can record contact details for key resources in their area, such as mental health, social, or legal services.

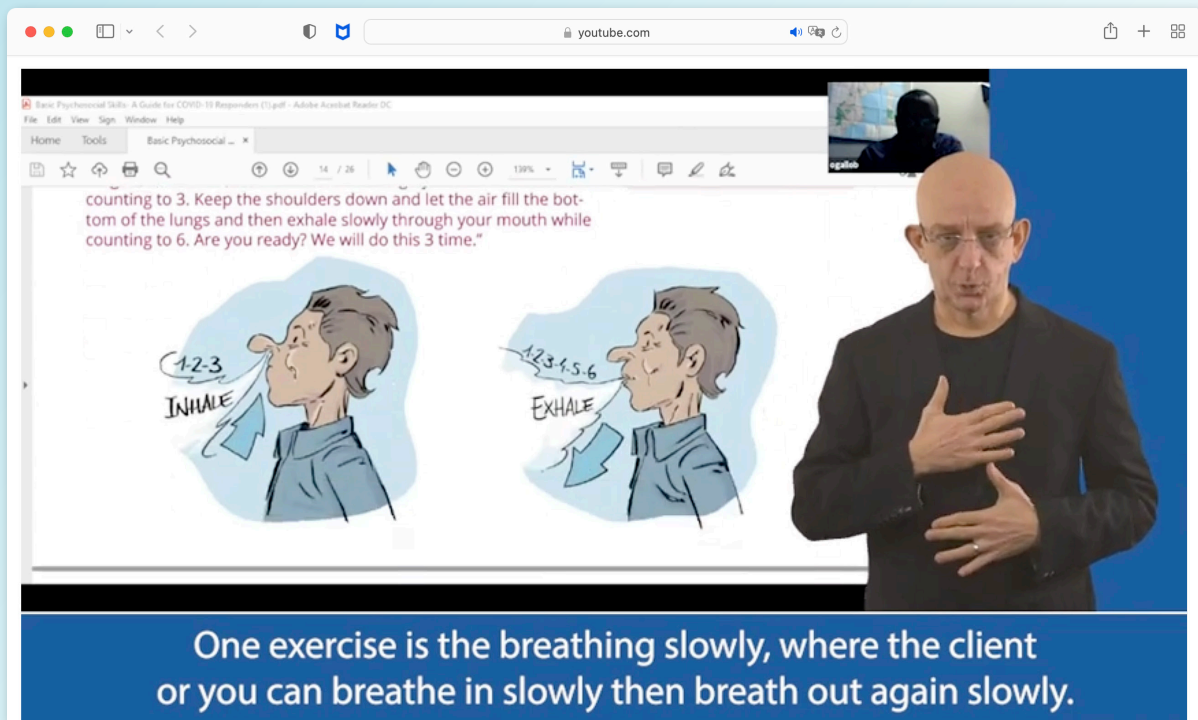
In summary, the guide offers a cohesive package of resources that individuals require to maintain their well-being and help others through their interactions during the pandemic.

Accuracy of scientific information

The development process of the guide comprised two rounds of formal consultations and weekly calls among the IASC MHPSS RG member organizations, including the chairs of the technical working groups deployed in 22 humanitarian emergencies. Drawing on existing psychosocial first aid and training materials allowed for the timely development of the guide.

Prior to its development, a survey was conducted to identify the mental health and psychosocial needs of potential users. Around 200 COVID-19 recovered persons and responders (such as health and protection professionals, transportation workers and managers) from 32 countries across all regions of the world participated in the survey. The draft guide, based on their inputs, was shared with the survey participants, and their feedback incorporated in the final version.





Screenshot from a three-part educational webinar with captions and sign language interpretation on Basic Psychosocial Skills organized collaboratively by CBM International and IASC MHPSS RG. Copyright and credit: IASC MHPSS RG.

Impact on knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of the target audience

Many organizations recognized the usefulness of the guide and developed online courses to supplement the guide. Some of the resulting products are as follows:

- 1) With support from WHO, the University of Technology Sydney developed a self-directed online Basic Psychosocial Skills training adapted for the Pacific Islands.ⁱⁱ
- 2) The Good Practice Group, the Asia Foundation and the Lotus Circle created a short course on Basic Psychosocial Skills to help COVID-19 first responders available in English, Sinhala and Tamil.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 3) The IASC MHPSS RG organized a three-part educational webinar on Basic Psychosocial Skills with captions and sign language interpretations^{iv, v, vi}.

Some of the other indicators of the impact of the guide are as follows:

- 1) As of January 2021, the English version has been downloaded 13 045 times from the IASC website (since launch in May 2020).
- 2) As of June 2021, WHO's Facebook post regarding the Basic Psychosocial Skills has had an engagement of 1.5 million views, 28 000 likes, and 1000 comments (since posted in June 2020).

Gender equality, equity and human rights considerations

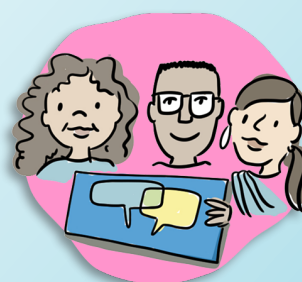
The responsible team has promoted gender, equity and human rights through a dedicated module to guide COVID-19 responders serving in vulnerable or marginalized communities. The module provides specific attention to:

- 1) people living in care homes;
- 2) women and girls affected by COVID-19;
- 3) people living in refugee camps, and informal refugee and migrant settings; and
- 4) people with disabilities.

In addition to the basic psychosocial guidance provided, the modules also link to further information for the care-providers of these groups.

In order to promote accessibility and participation, the guide has been made available in various accessible formats such as braille, easy-to-read, and electronic publication. It has also been translated into 37 languages to overcome language barriers.^{vii}

The illustrations are inclusive, and represent males and females equally in various cultural settings.





Limitations

The project team received requests to translate the guide at an unprecedented speed and was thus faced with the challenge to maintain the quality of the content across the translations. To this end, a dedicated team was assigned to support the quality assurance and logistics of all translations and designs.

Looking forward

The IASC MHPSS RG will continue supporting further dissemination, translation and implementation of the guide. As of November 2021, translations into Armenian and Urdu are ongoing. The Good Practice Group, the Asia Foundation and the Lotus Circle are creating five short videos using the guide's content that is being adapted specifically for Nepal, East Timor and Sri Lanka.



References

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- ii. UTS. Short course on basic psychosocial skills: training for responders; 2021 (<https://open.uts.edu.au/COVID-19-responders-en.aspx>).
- iii. Good Practice Group, Asia Foundation, Lotus Circle. Short course on basic psychosocial skills for first responders in Sri Lanka; 2020 (<https://www.psychosocialskills.org/>).
- iv. WHO webinar on basic psychosocial skills guide: Part 1 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0G11om_SF1c&t=918s).
- v. WHO webinar on basic psychosocial skills guide: Part 2 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9rqSR2LbBA>).
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- vii. IASC. Guidance on Basic Psychosocial Skills – A Guide for COVID-19 Responders: available formats and languages (<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-reference-group-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-emergency-settings/iasc-guidance-basic-psychosocial-skills-guide-covid-19-responders>).

Illustrations by Sam Bradd

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