



Institute for Disaster Mental Health

Tip Sheet on Haitian Culture

Note: The following is intended to provide basic background information on relevant aspects of Haitian culture for those volunteer and professional responders who may become involved in assisting survivors of the recent earthquake, or their friends and families living in the U.S. This overview is by no means comprehensive and those likely to have extensive contact are urged to seek out additional information on cultural competency. In addition, these tips include broad generalizations about cultural values and practices that may not apply to every person of Haitian background, so helpers are encouraged to recognize and respect individual differences in those you are assisting.

An Overview

- There is an old Haitian proverb that states “Beyond the mountains more mountains.” Although most of Haiti consists of mountains the proverb reflects the Haitian view that beyond current problems lie others.
- Haiti is the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere. It is understandable that Haitians are much more likely to focus on getting basic needs met and are not typically receptive to traditional counseling.
- There is significant distrust of authorities and professionals due to a long history of oppression and exploitation. Haitians suffered for decades under the rule of the Duvaliers (Papa and Baby Doc), leaders who modeled their secret military police after the Nazis. More recently, Jean-Bertrand Aristide came to power in 1990. He was soon forced into exile after a military coup but was reinstated in 1994, then forced to leave the country again in 2004. Since his departure Haiti has struggled to regain political stability under the rule of current president René Préval, efforts that have been thwarted by repeated natural disasters even before the recent earthquake.
- All Haitians speak Creole and only 2 to 5% speak French. However, because French is associated with higher classes, most Haitians will say that they do speak it.
- Haitians can be very expressive and speak loudly. Non-Haitians may misinterpret this as anger.
- Religion is a powerful force in Haitian culture. It is estimated that 80% identify as Catholics and 20% as Protestant. However, the practice of voodoo, including faith in its ability to cure illness as well as distress and mental illness, are common among all the classes although more acknowledged by the lower social classes.

Mental Health Characteristics

- Among those who practice voodoo, depression and other mental distress is cured by rituals such as having a priest or priestess bathing the patient in special oils and lotions and clearing the environment of bad spirits with candles, incense and special rituals. It should be noted that rituals intended to please or appease supernatural forces that are seen as creating problems is not very consistent with Western thought and culture, but should be respected as a culturally appropriate source of comfort. Also, many Haitians may be reluctant to discuss any of these topics with helpers or therapists.
- Family members, both immediate and extended, have very strong ties and it is common for individuals to experience direct effects on their mental health due to difficult life circumstance of family members. While “empathic family stress” can be associated with depressive symptoms, it is important that this culturally normative distress not be pathologized. Clinicians should not strive to reduce or eliminate empathic distress because it is an indication of the deep connection the client has with family. Instead, clients can be assisted in identifying such distress, and finding ways to cope effectively and be supportive to family members without internalizing their stress.
- Haitian women are likely to present with higher depressive symptoms than Haitian men, and assessment should include an understanding of gender differences in responsibilities, roles, and support in the family.
- Problems are often externalized, minimized, intellectualized or attributed to God. Symptoms of depression can be somatized or spiritualized. A depressed patient can complain of emptiness in the head or “gas” sensations in different parts of the body. Due to the oppression and torture of many regimes, it may not be surprising that Haitians can appear paranoid, when in fact they are appropriately suspicious.
- Se’izisman is the most frequently occurring syndrome specific to Haitian culture, and is particularly relevant in the aftermath of disaster. Literally meaning “seized-up-ness,” the associated state of paralysis is brought on by strong feelings of anger or sadness. The most frequent causes include receiving bad news, witnessing a traumatic event, or seeing dead bodies. Symptoms can include: headaches, increased blood pressure, loss of vision, disorientation, constant weeping, refusal to eat or sleep, unresponsiveness, shortness of breath. Because Haitians believe that Se’izisman can cause miscarriages, deformations, and contaminated breast milk, it is common for family to make every effort to protect pregnant and postpartum women from bad or shocking news.

Understanding Haitian Children and Families

- In Haitian families, children are thought to be gifts from God, and parents (specifically mothers) will do almost anything to ensure that their children's basic needs are met, even if it means neglecting their own basic needs.
- Family and community support are common within Haiti. Often times, a child is raised not only by his or her immediate family but also by extended family members and supportive members of the community. This differs somewhat from

common practices in the United States and may present difficulties for families who have recently relocated to the United States.

- It is important to remember that values (and their corresponding skills) vary from culture to culture. For example, although many Haitian children are able to make independent choices and entertain themselves at younger ages than American children, they tend to master concrete developmental tasks (e.g., dressing oneself, toilet training) later than American children.
- Respect and obedience are characteristics that are valued by Haitian families. Consequently, Haitian children tend to be obedient and respectful.
- When working with Haitian-American families, it will be important to remember that “appropriate discipline” varies from culture to culture. In Haiti, many families use physical punishment as their primary means of discipline .

Impact of Mass Burial and Culture on Bereavement

- Several aspects of deaths caused by the Haitian earthquake are likely to increase distress and complicate recovery for survivors.
- Deaths were sudden and unexpected, allowing survivors no time to say goodbye or to prepare for the loss. Many survivors will have lost multiple loved ones as well as tangible items like homes and pets, potentially overwhelming their coping capacity and robbing them of their usual sources of emotional support.
- Those who experienced the earthquake themselves most likely experienced intense fear and witnessed grotesque sights, increasing their risk of developing PTSD as well as complicating their bereavement.
- Mass burial of bodies is often necessary following large-scale disasters with casualties that overwhelm morgues and prevent normal body disposal practices, but it is widely recognized as highly distressing to survivors, particularly when no information is available about the location of specific remains.
- Following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, in cases where mass burials were unavoidable, efforts were made to photograph the bodies and record their locations so that family members could later identify their loved ones and at least achieve the certainty that they were indeed dead, as well as have the knowledge of where their remains lay. Without that certainty, it can be very difficult for survivors to accept that the loss is final and to begin the mourning process. This kind of record-keeping is not being done in Haiti, where officials say at least 50,000 bodies have been anonymously interred in mass graves, leaving families with no way to know where their loved ones' remains are.
- The emotional impact of this uncertainty can be compounded when survivors experience distress and guilt about being unable to complete culturally prescribed death rituals, as is likely to be true for many Haitians given their specific cultural values.
- Far from the popular perceptions of magic and sorcery, voodoo's rituals and practices are viewed as ways to honor and remain connected to one's ancestors. As a result, the inability to bury loved ones properly in family plots is likely to be extraordinarily upsetting for adherents.
- Voodoo burial rituals include practices intended to make sure the dead do not come back to life as zombies, so in addition to grief over the loss and guilt and

- distress over the disrespectful disposal of their loved ones' remains that anyone would feel, Haitian survivors may also be experiencing the fear that spirits of the earthquake victims buried in mass graves will rise from the dead. Understanding and respecting this fear is essential for helpers working with bereaved Haitians, whether they experienced the earthquake themselves or are coping from afar with the loss of a loved one.
- Encourage those in distress over their inability to conduct proper burial rites to contact spiritual leaders for advice on rituals that can calm those culturally specific concerns; only then will survivors be able to move on to coping with the universal feelings of mourning and grief and the difficult process of adjusting to their loss.

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