

# CONTEXT OF THE DISASTER AND TRAUMA IN CHILDREN IN PUERTO RICO. WHAT CAN WE DO?

Mental Health and COVID-19: Response and planning for the needs of children and family / Helga Maldonado Domínguez, Family Specialist



- **First non-profit organization** created in Puerto Rico (1983) with the mission of preventing child abuse.
- It has stood out as the main institution in the intervention, treatment, care and prevention of child abuse and family violence.
- General counseling, specialized counseling including home visits, crisis intervention, psychological services, telephone counseling, Early Head Start Program (center for care and development of infants / mothers and their families), healthy parenting courses, talks, workshops, educational campaigns and awareness, development and distribution of educational material, as well as research on the problem of child abuse and family violence.



A photograph of a street in a residential area after a disaster. The street is covered in debris, including twisted metal, wood, and other household items. On the left, a two-story building has a damaged roof and exposed structure. On the right, a two-story building with a balcony and a satellite dish is visible. The sky is overcast and grey, and the overall atmosphere is somber. A dark horizontal band across the middle of the image contains the text "ESCAPE after the disaster...".

**ESCAPE** after the disaster...





We adjusted to **NEW CHALLENGES.**







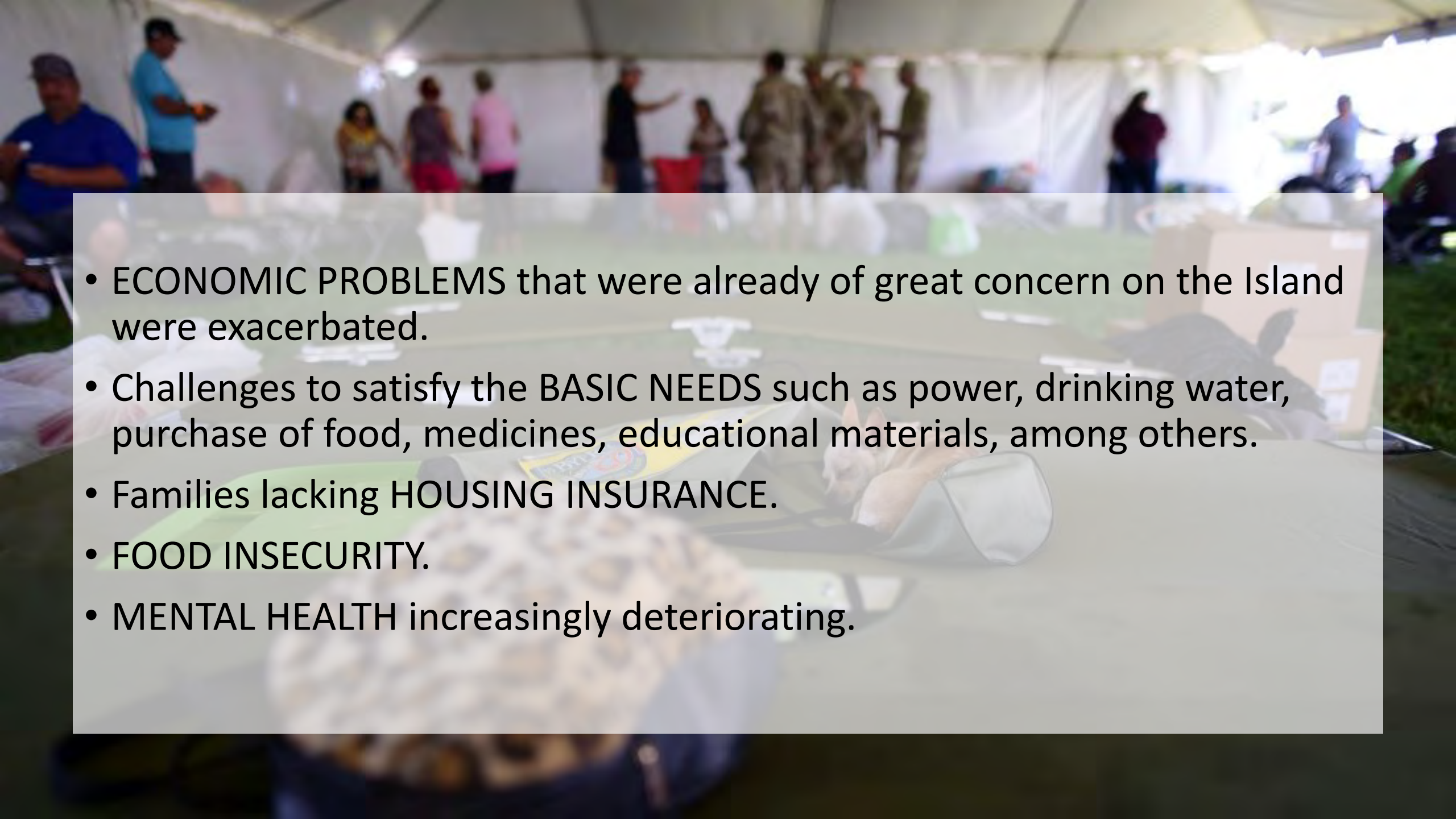
- Collection and distribution of **SUPPLIES** to families and communities.
- **PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES** to victims of hurricanes and earthquakes.
- **PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES** to earthquake victims.
- **FOOD** bank and supplies.
- **INTERVENTIONS** with children and adults in shelters and community camps.
- **COORDINATION** of services.



# A DIFFERENT VIEW OF DISASTERS



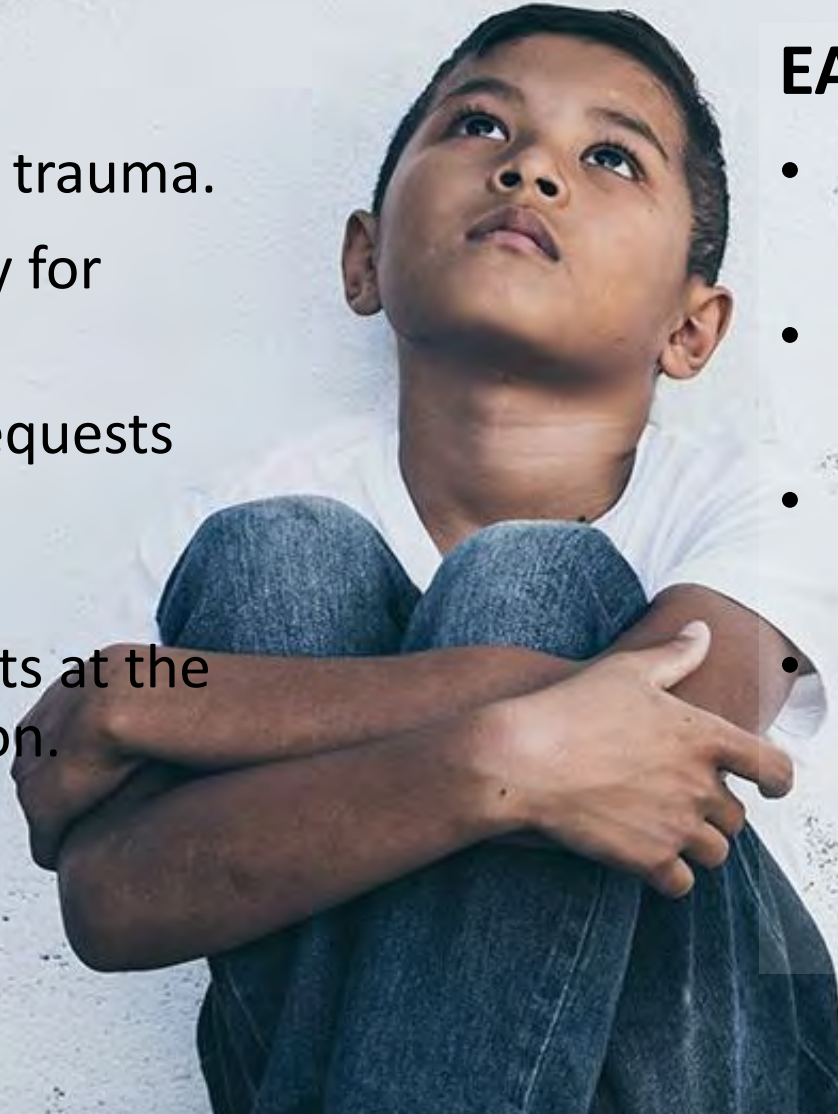


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- ECONOMIC PROBLEMS that were already of great concern on the Island were exacerbated.
  - Challenges to satisfy the BASIC NEEDS such as power, drinking water, purchase of food, medicines, educational materials, among others.
  - Families lacking HOUSING INSURANCE.
  - FOOD INSECURITY.
  - MENTAL HEALTH increasingly deteriorating.

# DIFFERENCES IN THE RESPONSE OF THE POPULATION TO BOTH DISASTERS

## HURICANES:

- Late recognition of existing trauma.
- People took longer to apply for mental health services.
- There was an increase in requests 6 months after passage of Hurricane Maria.
- Another increase in requests at the start of the hurricane season.



## EARTHQUAKES:

- People requested the service Immediately.
- Much openness to psychological first aid in communities.
- Severe emotional distress was immediately experienced.
- Constant insecurity. High levels of anxiety





## ADULTS:

- Constant concern for their current situation and deficiencies.
- Concern for their own well-being and that of their families.
- Lack of knowledge about how to manage your emotional distress and that of your children.





## **ADULTS:**

- Sadness
- Constant concern
- Frustration
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Depression
- Sleeping problems
- Physical manifestations



# DAILY LIFE ISSUES

- Difficulty fulfilling their role as father, mother or caregiver.
- Difficulty concentrating and performing properly in their jobs.
- Difficulty managing and regulating emotions.
- Difficulty establishing or maintaining healthy relationships.
- Increase in situations of abuse and family violence.
- Fear for the consequences that the poverty they faced could bring (referring to the Family Department, suspension of services, etc.)





## CHILDREN:

- Behavior problems
- Trouble concentrating
- Problems relating
- Challenges in the school area
- Regression in stages of development
- Disruption in sleep patterns
- Excessive concern
- Irritability and anxiety



## SCHOOLS:

- Difficulty learning new concepts
- Trouble memorizing
- Increased aggressive behavior
- General behavior problems
- Teachers with the same concerns and challenges as the general population



# BALANCE OF DISASTERS IN EDUCATION

- School closings
- Overcrowding in the classroom
- Teachers anxious and overwhelmed by the difficult situation and lack of resources to attend to it.
- Family problems are reflected in the classroom.

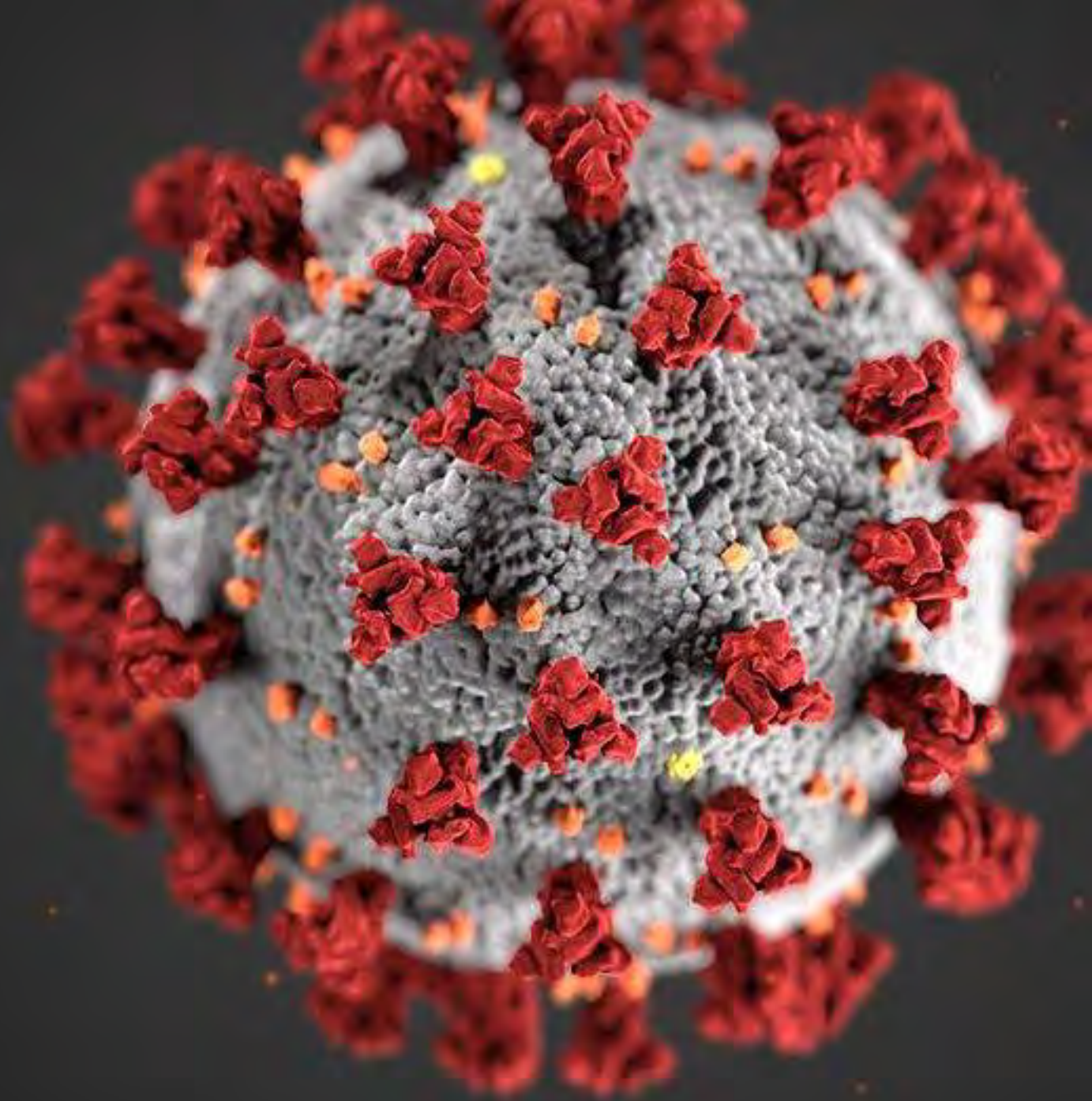


A close-up, side-profile shot of a woman with dark, curly hair. She is wearing a yellow surgical mask. Her hands are raised towards her face, with fingers near the top of the mask, as if she is adjusting it or about to remove it. The background is out of focus, showing what appears to be a doorway or a wall.

**EMERGENCY OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**



**THIRD TRAUMA**  
for the island in  
less than 3 years





- Population has not yet overcome the trauma of hurricanes and earthquakes.
- Psychological crises, child abuse and gender violence have exploded.





**Third Sector begins a quick response and **ESCAPE**  
was not the exception**

# EFFORTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

- Continuation of services to all active participants remotely or virtual.
- Psychological therapy services.
- Virtual and telephone counseling for parents and caregivers with parenting concerns during the pandemic.
- Distribution of food and supplies to the community.
- Coordination of services.
- Capsules and informative posts on our platforms on the networks.

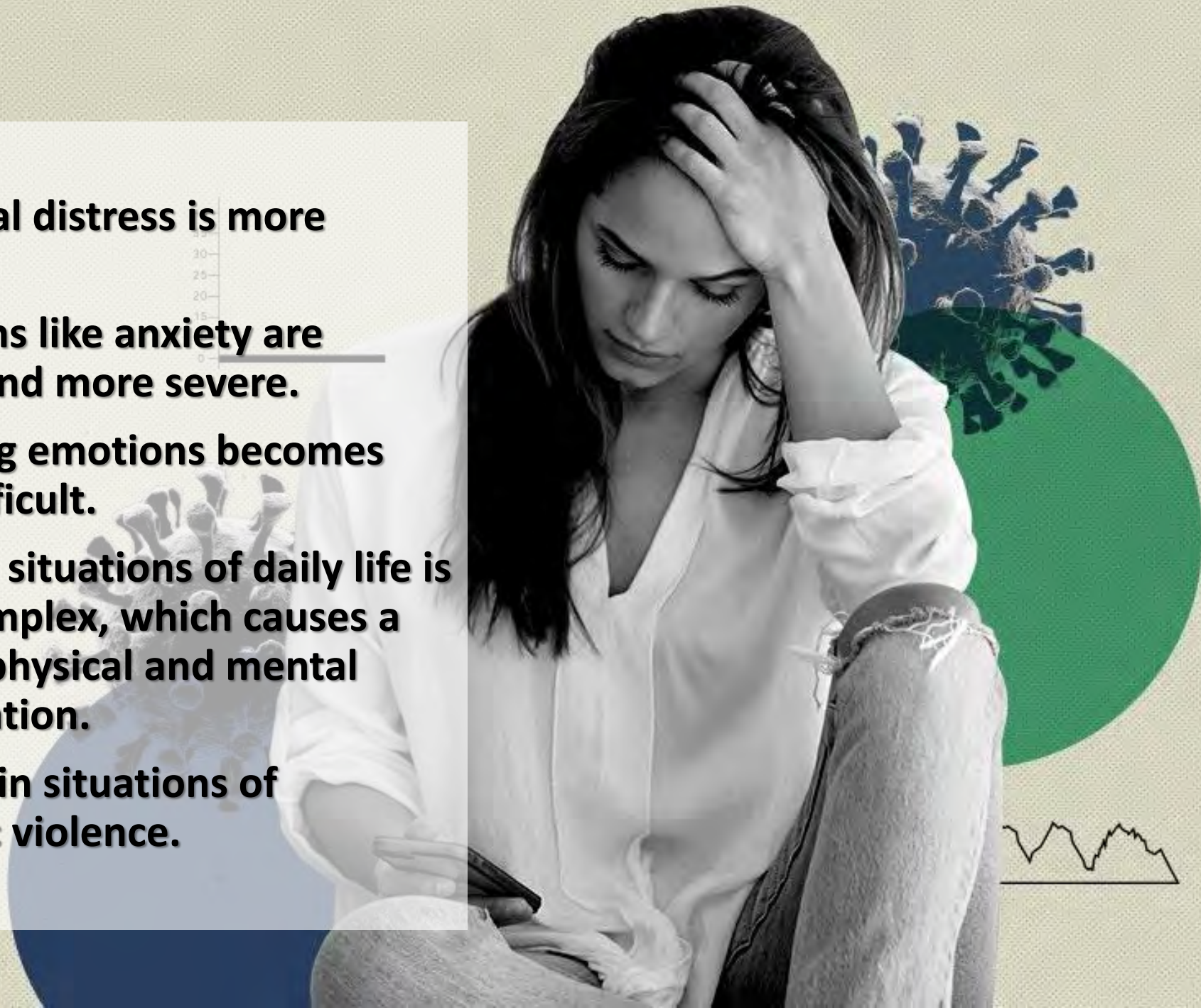


HOW ARE FAMILIES DOING TODAY?





- Emotional distress is more evident.
- Symptoms like anxiety are deeper and more severe.
- Managing emotions becomes more difficult.
- Handling situations of daily life is more complex, which causes a marked physical and mental deterioration.
- Increase in situations of domestic violence.





These are all responses associated to **TRAUMA**





They all reflect our recent HISTORY





What does  
research  
say?



- **“When people face stressors and difficult life circumstances; It can affect three particularly important areas: a sense of security, feelings of connection with other people and feelings of hope. ” (Jones 2019, p. 14)**
- **"Children with identified trauma stories can become especially vulnerable to the impact of significant changes in their agendas, routines, and expectations that come with social estrangement." (Jones 2019, p. 15)**



# TRAUMA Y CRIANZA

**"I don't know why he is sad. But I don't want to deal with it. I would give her a hug and tell her that everything will be fine. But I do not do it. I TRY NOT TO DO ANYTHING TO NOT FEEL ANYTHING. So I am handling it "(Anonymous mother in telephone intervention).**







**Creating adequate conditions so that our  
children, adolescents and young people  
can overcome trauma **IS POSSIBLE.****





# RECOMMENDATIONS



# AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS THAT WORK WITH FAMILIES

- Trauma-focused services with a greater understanding of the context in which they live.
- Intervention strategies also focused on trauma that minimize the impact of trauma on children's lives.
- Comprehensive education for parents and caregivers that provides background information on the manifestations of trauma in their children's lives and behavior and strategies for managing it.
- This education should also focus on guiding adults on how trauma affects their performance within the family.



# EDUCATION SYSTEM

- Offer teachers and school personnel information and training on trauma-informed education.
- Create sensitive and realistic spaces that support the proper management of the manifestations of trauma of our children
- Guide and offer emotional support resources to educators to help them manage the aftermath of recent trauma.
- A realistic curriculum and academic goals that do not represent a major stressor for the student population.
- Make mental health professionals available at each school.

# COMMUNITIES

- They must educate themselves about trauma and its effects; and the ways that you can support children in your neighborhood.
- Get to know your neighbors so that families can offer support to each other.
- If you are concerned about a child, REPORT THE SITUATION to the Family Department, DO SOMETHING.
- Volunteer with organizations and causes that protect children.



# COMPANIES

- Join community organizations as collaborating partners (sponsor).
- Integrate, promote and reinforce volunteerism among employees.
- That promote healthy work practices and allow spaces for healing.
- Provide childcare and play spaces and make your businesses one that celebrates family and children.

# MEDIA

- Spread the word! Share information about the extent of the trauma.
- Become allies of communities and children.
- Publish simple but enriching information related to trauma and its implications for society.
- Help change the focus of prevention, not just talk about the tragedy of the disaster, but how it can be addressed and how we can support it.
- Share success stories of organizations that offer support and prevention services.



# POLICY MAKERS

- Increase education and support services for families, especially in the regions and towns with the highest incidence of poverty and most affected by recent events.
- Invest resources in the medium and long term.
- Orient yourself with subject matter experts to ensure that the investment of resources is made in programs and services with proven success.
- Promote public policies that integrate social equality and fair practices that create recovery conditions in the education system.

At **ESCAPE** we bet on  
the resilience of  
children and the  
country; and we will  
accompany you in  
that process.







PEACE starts at home

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