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APA Offers Condolences, Support over Tragic Tsunami Disaster

**Statement by Michelle B. Riba, M.D., M.S.
President, American Psychiatric Association**

Arlington, Va. - The American Psychiatric Association (APA) joins all Americans and the international community in mourning the tragic loss of life that has occurred as a result of the Indian Ocean tsunamis.

We express our deepest sympathy to the residents of the countries hit by the catastrophe and to our members, colleagues, and friends who have lost loved ones. We express our support to those who are still awaiting word on the fates of family members, friends, and colleagues in the affected areas. We also wish to convey empathy with those who are experiencing the effects of disruptions of social supports and destruction and loss of property. The grief associated with this disaster is universal, and touches all of our lives.

Psychiatrists, as part of the world medical community, reach out to those who are affected by all forms of disaster. The APA has offered to work in partnership with the leadership of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) and the World Health Organization (WHO), and in concert with national and regional psychiatric organizations and government agencies throughout Southeast Asia and Africa and help to respond to the mental health consequences of this disaster. APA also will undertake efforts within the U.S. to assure accessibility to necessary psychiatric care to individuals in this country who are affected by the loss of family members and others in the affected regions.

People who have been affected directly and indirectly by disasters or traumatic events may experience an array of psychological or bodily reactions, including fear, anxiety, sadness, emotional numbing, sleeplessness, and various bodily ailments such as headaches. Reactions may also include distrust of others and a loss of confidence in themselves. As the world psychiatric community engages the challenge of reaching out to individuals in all of the countries affected by the Indian Ocean tsunamis, it will be particularly crucial that any supportive as well as therapeutic interventions appreciate and respect cultural variations in grief reactions and coping strategies.

It is important for health care providers and others to avoid defining as pathological normal stress responses in disaster situations. Many of these reactions are transient and may resolve. In some instances, however, it may be appropriate for affected persons to seek treatment for trauma-related emotional states. In particular, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals may be called upon to provide treatment for individuals with particular vulnerabilities, including pre-existing mental illnesses, who might become more severely disabled without specialized care. At a broader level, health care and social service providers, and other responders in the community should be aware of strategies for helping to promote people's psychosocial wellbeing and resilience and further reduce distress or harm to disaster victims.

For more information on how to respond appropriately to trauma victims, please visit APA's disaster psychiatry Web site at www.psych.org.

The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society, founded in 1844, whose more than 36,000 physician members specialize in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. For more information, visit the APA Web site at www.psych.org.