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# The Ways of Reduction of People's Psychological Distress During the Post-Accidents on the Atomic Plants

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**Abstract.** The study of people's status in Belarus after the Chernobyl accident shows that independently from the place of residence they experienced a strong psychological distress which was caused by fears before the accident consequences. This paper gives the characteristics of fears influencing on the growth of the given phenomenon and proposals how to eliminate the same situations in the future.

## 1. Method.

The data for this paper were taken from the sociological surveys. They included the questionnaire study of people, the expert's evaluations, statistical data collection and etc. The questionnaire study concerned 218 persons from the restricted area with the radioactive contamination 15-40 Cu/km<sup>2</sup>, 250 persons from the non restricted area, 255 resettled persons from the 30 km area and 262 residents from the clean (controlled) area. Respectively there were 42% of men and 58% of women. The subjects of study were representatives of all main occupational groups: pensioners, housewives and pupils in the age from 16 to 75 years.

## 2. Data.

The sociological study showed that 55.2% of respondents considered the Chernobyl accident the reason of the rather much and very much psychological distress, 33.3% indicated rather little and very little psychological distress and only 11% gave a negative answer (0.8% did not answer). 48.4% of the respondents considered that they and their families experienced the real radiation risk due to accident in rather high and very high extent, 45.0% reported very little and rather little extent of the risk, 4.9% indicated the absence of any kind of risk (1.8% did not answered). The distress was connected first of all with people's worry about personal and children health. For example, 64.5% of the respondents worried rather and very much about personal and their children health, 64.5% were rather little and very little worried, only 3.7% were not at all worried (0.7% did

not answer). People's fear for personal and their children health was caused at that time and later by their ignorance of the radiation affects on human body and environment and by the firm belief in its harmful consequences for all living creatures. The long term concealment of the trustworthy information about the real scale of the accident, its hushing up by the mass media had led to the belief that "there are something to be withheld". For example, 53.6% of respondents in September 1993 supposed that the experts and medical doctors knew the information which had been withheld from the population, 27.9% of respondents were not quite sure, and only 17.6% supposed that such an information did not exist (0.9% did not answer). Taking into account such a situation people acquire the attitude towards the perception of any information from the non official sources as trustworthy, because they need the information very much. Thus 31.4% of respondents reported that they talk about the Chernobyl accident almost every day, 13.4% at least once a week, 9.4% - at least once a month, 42.9% - seldom. Only 2.3% did not talk at all (0.4% did not answer).

Being sure in the destructive radiation affect on person people try to explain all their diseases recently appeared and health disorders to the Chernobyl accident consequences and demand with insistence from the authorities to recognize them the victims and to give them a privilege established for this group of citizens. Since the connection of the disease with the radiation affect is not proved, they are inclined to distrust the competence of people, who investigate the radiation affects on the health. For example, while the questionnaire study 15.1% did not trust at all the competence of specialists, 62.9% - had very little and neither much nor little trust, and 20.1% trusted almost completely and completely. Therefore, many people are coming to the capital for the medical examination and hope to find the competent specialists, but they are usually disappointed by these visits that strengthens the tension.

The other strong distress factor is the people's confidence that they consume dirty foodstuffs and are not able to change something in their life because the economic difficulties which endure people in Belarus, the low standard of life do not allow them to consume guaranteed clean foodstuffs (delivered from the clean areas and from abroad) and force them to consume the local ones, but people do not know how to make it less dangerous.

Thus, the distress due to the Chernobyl accident could be marked less, if people had been ready to the eventual consequences and management structures knew exactly how to act in such situations and first of all how and about what to inform people in order to avoid rumours and panic.

These knowledge should be the next:

- openness of the information about the work of the atomic plants, their construction, reliability;
- acquaintance with devices for measurement of the environment, foodstuffs radioactive contamination and their accessibility to people;
- knowledge of the radiation affect on the human health and preventive measures for reduction of its destructive affects;
- exhaustive information of people about the eventual consequences of their residence in the contaminated areas and the modes of risk reduction;

- elaboration of such measures of people's social protection, which guarantee their future.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The study revealed the high level of people's worry, their complete distrust towards the power structures, mass media, experts in the field of radiation and public health. People reported that the local authorities did not take care of them. 77.1% of the respondents were worried about their future. 87.4% of the respondents were helpless to change something in this situation. All these circumstances create the background for people's chronic distress and require the carrying out of the rehabilitation measures throughout the republic.