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# The Role Of The Social Worker In Providing Medical Social Services (Psychological And Social Support For Patients)

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## Abstract:

The role of social worker is crucial and effective with both patients and medical team of social services.

Understanding the social and psychological conditions associated with illness, as well as the environmental factors, helping patients to benefit from medical treatment programs by overcoming difficulties and solving personal and environmental problems that affect patients' life are some of these roles.

Generally, the practice of social work in medical institutions aims at making a positive effect and assisting these institutions in fulfilling their roles, dealing with patients and their families by providing psychological and social support, as well as therapeutic, preventive, and relief medical services

**Key Concepts:** Social work, medical social work, social worker, medical social worker.

## Introduction:

Many studies have indicated that diseases are closely linked to patients' psychological and social conditions. Some patients may experience depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, social isolation, and post-traumatic disorders—these are some of the potential psychological effects following serious illnesses like cancer and diabetes. On one hand, the success of healthcare is tied to the social factors affecting the patients, as these factors can negatively impact their quality of life and recovery. Therefore, patients need psychological and social support alongside medical care. Given these considerations, medical social work is a professional effort and humanitarian service aimed at helping patients and their families cope with illness and treatment. The social worker in the medical field, with the support of the healthcare team, seeks to provide the psychological and social needs of patients through various programs and services. They also assist and support the families

of clients in overcoming social issues (like family and financial problems) that may hinder the treatment plan. Providing psychological and social support for patients is essential, and it should be part of the services offered by the medical team and social workers to empower patients to handle these challenges. The social worker aims to alleviate symptoms and promote positive coping strategies.

Moreover, the various methods of the social work profession (individual service, group service, and community service) are integrated in such a way that makes it impossible to prioritize one over the others. Achieving the assistance process and its goals requires individuals, groups, and communities, or organizations, to perform their social roles and functions and help them confront various issues that hinder their social performance, depending on the nature of these problems and social situations.

### **Secondly: The goals and importance of the article:**

The significance of this study lies in highlighting medical social work as a fundamental pillar in addressing the social conditions and issues that affect health and illness. Many people believe that the causes of diseases, regardless of their labels, have a social dimension, leading many experts to argue that illness is a social problem, not merely a medical one. Based on this, the goals of the article can be summarized as follows:

- Introduction to the social worker and medical social work, highlighting its importance as a field within social services. Hospital institutions are no longer just about the roles of doctors and nurses; they also need the presence of a trained and qualified social worker in the medical field.
- Understanding the theoretical and practical standards and requirements for the professional preparation of social workers in the medical field.
- Identifying the preventive, therapeutic, and developmental goals of medical social work.
- Recognizing the roles of the social worker in medical social work through the three methods of social work (individual service, community service, and community organization service).

**Third: Key concepts of the article:** (medical social work, social worker, medical social worker).

**1. Definition of medical social work:** Medical social work has multiple definitions that may differ in wording and form but agree in essence and content. Professor Fatima Al-Harouni defines it as "a set of social efforts aimed at assisting the doctor in diagnosing certain ambiguous cases and in outlining a treatment plan for them, and enabling patients to benefit from the treatment provided to them, and to regain their social functions, by removing the obstacles that hinder their access to the therapeutic opportunities available to them, and facilitating the conditions for their reintegration into society after recovery" (Hassan Saleh, 2002, 289).

Today, hospitals and health structures in general no longer deal solely with the doctor, but rely on a system of medical treatment teams consisting of various specialties starting with the trained and qualified social worker in the medical field, who plays a significant role in studying the patient's treatment plan and helping them adapt to their

health condition, while providing various services tailored to each case and assisting them until they reach a state of psychological and physical balance. The social worker is not just an ordinary person; they must possess a range of skills in the field, have knowledge of basic medical information, and have particular awareness of the needs and psychological characteristics of patients, as well as a broad understanding of rehabilitation, legal matters, and other areas, and should be knowledgeable and aware of the issues arising from the patients' conditions, possess the skill to assess feelings, help clients, and establish a successful professional relationship with them, among other skills.

In addition to the social worker, there are other members of the medical team, including doctors, nurses, pharmacists, nutritionists, and physical therapists, etc.

Modern medicine, or contemporary medical practice, relies on a health system based on interaction with three factors: sociological factors, psychological factors, and biological factors, which support medical work and achieve its goals. Health social work is defined as: the professional processes and scientific efforts made by the social worker to study the patient's responses to their health issues; it is the sum of social efforts directed at assisting the doctor in diagnosing certain ambiguous cases and formulating a treatment plan for them (Talaat, 2009, 116).

'Eqbal Bashir' defines it as one of the fields of social work practiced in medical institutions to help individuals or groups utilize their potential and the potential of their community to overcome the challenges that hinder their social functioning. This is aimed at benefiting from medical treatment and maximizing social performance as much as possible. (Eqbal, 1977, 27)

The main function of medical social work in healthcare or treatment institutions is to provide appropriate opportunities that enable patients to effectively utilize medical services, based on collaborative efforts among the doctor, nursing staff, and social worker. Moreover, the role of the social worker goes beyond what they do in healthcare institutions for the beneficiaries of those services. It expands to the environments of these patients to ensure they gain the maximum possible benefit from treatment and recovery while being able to socially function in the shortest time possible, while also helping the patient's family adjust to the social environment, both within the family and outside of it, after the patient leaves the hospital.

**2. The social worker:** A social worker is a person in the field of social work who strives to improve the social, economic, and health conditions of individuals and communities. The social worker utilizes their skills in social interaction, assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation to provide individuals and communities with the necessary support to overcome the social and psychological problems they face.

The social worker also operates in various fields, including social care, family and community assistance, medical health care, psychological treatment and rehabilitation, education, training, professional development, and employment...

**3. The medical social worker:** is the professional who delivers medical care to community members, educates them on health issues, and contributes to organizing seminars and regular meetings to raise awareness about prevalent and infectious

diseases. They also participate in developing treatment plans and regulations that govern the work of medical social workers to enhance the quality of social medical services provided to patients. (Mahfoud, 17, 2016)

They strive to meet patients' needs by addressing the social and psychological circumstances surrounding them and their professional practice while cooperating with the specialized medical team to facilitate the reception of patients and prepare them psychologically and emotionally to accept treatment plans. (el-Sijani, 2015, 206)

Thus, the social worker in the field of medical social services collaborates with the medical team and the medical profession in general to implement the treatment plan after conducting an in-depth study of the foundations of social services, its methods, and its application in the medical field, aiming to bring the patient to a state of physical, psychological, and social balance. The issue for the social worker is not the illness itself, as that is the responsibility of the medical team, but the problem may lie in the patient's acceptance of the illness or their situation, their conviction regarding the treatment, or their comfort with the doctor. Alternatively, the issue may stem from their social circumstances and their adaptation to a new social status (Iqbal, el-Saddiqi, 30, 1988). The social worker assesses the patient's future regarding their physical health, the possibility of returning to their previous job, modifying their role, or finding suitable rehabilitation in relation to their past work or a future job after recovery. They also consider the patient's family environment while gathering all information about the economic, social, educational, and adaptive dimensions related to this environment. In doing so, the social worker aims to understand the client's ability to cope with their problems, their need for assistance, and how they interact with circumstances surrounding the illness that may pose a threat or setback, sometimes even more than the illness itself. The role of the social worker is not less than that of the treating physician at times.

#### **Fourth: The Emergence of Medical Social Work:**

The appearance of social work in the medical field is linked to the care of mental patients or those suffering from mental illnesses after their discharge from asylums and hospitals. Official and private institutions were established to care for them, particularly for those without family support, starting in England in 1880. At that time, visitors would go to the patients' homes and converse with them and their families and friends, providing the necessary support to help them overcome their illness and crisis, nurse them, and offer some financial assistance if needed.

Another factor that contributed to the emergence of medical social work was medical students who underwent practical training in social institutions. In 1902, the University of Baltimore requested that the study include social and emotional issues and encouraged its students to volunteer in charitable organizations so they could gain an understanding of the social and psychological impacts and be aware of the living conditions of patients. (Al-Meligy, 2006, p. 27)

The first department of social work in the medical field was established at Massachusetts Hospital in America in 1905. With the introduction of social sciences highlighting the importance of studying the psychological and social factors associated with various illnesses, especially chronic ones, and the negative effects these have on the

patient and their family, there was increased attention to patients in their natural environments by social specialists in the medical field. The inability of doctors to meet all the patients' needs reinforced the significance of teamwork on medical cases and the integration and collaboration of efforts to provide medical care for patients and their families while achieving overall health.

Medical social work does not only deal with the patient but also demonstrates its importance by engaging with the entire medical institution, including management, doctors, nursing staff, and administrators. Its scope even extends to the various environments of the patient, such as family and workplace, etc. This means it treats the patient as a complete unit, considering their different social, psychological, physical, health, mental, and economic aspects to maximize the benefits of the medical team's efforts for the patient and achieve optimal social performance as quickly as possible. The effectiveness of the role of social work in the medical field relies on the social worker's ability to establish sound and fruitful communication with others on the medical team and their capability to reach accurate assessments of each case and its circumstances.

The right treatment is the one approved by the treating physician after understanding the patient's social, psychological, economic, and cultural circumstances. After that, the social worker adds their touch again by educating the patient, their family, and those around them, especially in cases that require the patient to feel reassured and comfortable (like surgeries, serious illnesses, etc.), or when social services deal with the symptoms and circumstances associated with the illness, which can sometimes pose a threat to the patient and lead to a setback that is worse than the illness itself. These impacts and setbacks can extend to the family, hindering their adaptation, performance, and relationships with the patient.

**Fifth: Professional preparation for the medical social worker:**

The professional preparation of the social worker includes a set of qualities that must be present, especially when we talk about the professional readiness of practitioners in health social services with appropriate physical and health capabilities that make them capable of enduring the hardships and difficulties of the profession or in a way that doesn't evoke feelings of pity or ridicule in clients. They should also possess patience, tolerance, balance, emotional maturity, self-control, and the ability to bear full responsibility towards themselves, their profession, and those they deal with. Additionally, they must have an adequate and appropriate level of mental balance, along with wide awareness and knowledge that ensures an appropriate amount of knowledge and information required for their profession or fulfilling their social roles, whether related to medical sciences or other relevant sciences and fields concerning clients or society as a whole. They should serve as a role model, reflecting the position and responsibility placed upon them, especially in terms of the principles, values, and sound moral traits they carry, controlling their own desires and personal issues, ensuring that their personal problems do not interfere in the professional realm, particularly when assisting clients whom they must accept, support, listen to, and be fully attentive to their specific problems without any barriers or obstacles preventing the helping process from occurring in the best possible way.

In addition to the previously mentioned points, one must be approachable, cheerful, balanced, and radiate positive energy. They should fully understand the meaning of

dialogue and possess active and attentive listening skills. They ought to be able to connect events, problems, and sciences, and be astute with an exceptional ability to handle various situations and challenges, among other things.

As for the professional training of a social worker in the medical field, it requires both theoretical and practical preparation:

- **Theoretical preparation:** the study of a social work student in the medical field should include some knowledge and sciences, such as: (Hassan Saleh, 2002, 303 304).

✓ Basic medical knowledge about types and key diseases and their causes, especially those that are common and those that are considered dangerous or require isolation treatment, and understanding common medical terms, as well as referring to doctors and specialists whenever necessary.

✓ Understanding the psychological needs and characteristics of the patient, and bolstering that knowledge with insights from social psychology, psychiatry, and sociology, aiming to achieve a deeper understanding of certain behaviors and psychological symptoms. This includes analyzing the patient's personality to choose the appropriate approach and style of interaction that aligns with each case and personality.

✓ Conducting an exhaustive study of the foundations and methods of social work, with a focus on medical social work.

✓ A broad culture of rehabilitative and legal issues and more that might aid the medical social worker in their role, such as utilizing laws related to professional rehabilitation, benefits, and social insurance, along with pensions, disability, and work injury benefits. All these can help them provide assistance, guidance, and raise awareness among patients to claim their rights.

✓ Being aware of and knowledgeable about the problems associated with illnesses, understanding the psychological, social, and biological needs of patients even after recovery.

✓ A wide-ranging understanding of resources that can assist in supplementing hospital services, such as vocational and physical rehabilitation institutions, recovery homes, social institutions, and labour offices, to help patients (clients) benefit from available community resources during and after treatment.

- **Practical preparation: (training and practice):** Although theoretical preparation has rich content and benefits, theoretical experience alone is not enough for a medical social worker. It is practice that completes and hones this theoretical path, enhancing professional readiness. This practice and the acquisition of practical experience must take place under high-level technical supervision, allowing interaction with patients and a grasp of their health, social, psychological, and emotional issues. This way, there is a conscious and direct understanding of the social, psychological, and health impacts surrounding the patients and their families.

In general, a social worker in the medical field must possess a set of special qualifications, skills, and both scientific and practical experiences. This includes a thorough understanding of the social work profession (knowledge, philosophy, goals, principles, components, and ethics) and familiarity with the administrative system of social services, as well as knowledge of policies and procedures followed in medical

institutions and the ability to interact effectively with all parties involved, especially patients and their families. Here, the social worker needs linguistic knowledge skills to enhance speaking, dialogue, discussion, and effective communication abilities.

**Sixth: The role of the social worker in the medical field:** The methods of the social work profession – individual service, group service, and community service – are integrated in such a way that one cannot choose the best among them. Achieving the goal of assistance requires individuals, groups, communities, or organizations to perform their social roles and functions and to help them face various problems that hinder their social performance, depending on the nature of these problems and social situations. Here, we will briefly present the role of social work in the medical field, clarifying the roles of individual service, group service, and community organization as aspects of the medical care provided to patients in medical institutions, as well as the contribution of the social work profession in helping this organization to perform effectively and achieve its objectives. As mentioned earlier, modern medical practice is no longer limited to biological aspects, and the role of the treating physician does not rely solely on diagnosis and treatment; it has extended to include psychological and sociological treatment.

- **The way to provide individual service in the medical field:** the social worker does their job through collaboration and teamwork with the medical staff (doctor, nurse, and all hospital workers) so that the necessary services and assistance can be provided in a cooperative and integrated manner without forgetting to refer to the psychologist. The social worker's role is: (Hassan Saleh, 2002, 309)

- ✓ To identify the patient (their medical and social history) and then meet with the treating doctor to discuss the patient's issue and complaints. Based on that, they attempt to help patients facing ambiguous problems and situations such as:
- ✓ A direct fear of death.
- ✓ The patient's doubts about the value of medical treatment, and there are some patients who refuse to enter the hospital due to painful memories or failed experiences. The social worker's role here is to instil a sense of reassurance in the patient and alleviate feelings of fear or pain.
- ✓ Patients may hesitate to accept treatment in the hospital or treatment centers out of fear that it will prolong their stay there, thus interrupting their life plans.
- ✓ Some unconscious fears arise due to connections with previous failed or painful experiences (like death, and the fear of ghosts, spirits, and death), and the social worker's role is to eliminate these fears, even for those who fear surgery, anesthesia, and the associated pains...etc.
- ✓ The high costs of treatment and the family's inability to meet all expenses within their budget can make the patient resist the idea of treatment and reject it, especially if the treatment duration is prolonged and the family continues to bear the costs, which weigh heavily on them.
- ✓ The inability to accept treatment due to the patient's concern for their family, as there will be no provider after them, especially in the case of the mother.

There are also other reasons that the social worker seeks to uncover if there is resistance or refusal from the patient to commit to the treatment plan or accept help for specific reasons, such as the fear of discovering the type of illness, especially among those with infectious diseases. This leads the patient to hide the nature of their illness and resist or refuse to see a doctor to avoid ridicule. In general, no matter the reason behind the client's or patient's rejection of treatment and resistance to it, the social worker must make every effort to understand the nature of the illness, the patient's social history, and the social problems associated with the illness. They need to study the environmental conditions in which the patient lives and correlate them with the situation at hand, examine the patient's personality, economic status, income sources, family environment, and the way the family treats the patient.

All of this belongs to the assessment stage, followed by the diagnosis stage where the social worker diagnoses the problem and develops a treatment plan that fits with environmental, familial, and personal therapy, ensuring that the treatment plan includes the following dimensions: (Hassan Saleh, 2002, 209)

- Rehabilitating the patient and following up after recovery.
- Explaining the aspects of the illness to the family and how to deal with it.
- Helping the patient find suitable employment.
- Easing the challenges faced by the client and collaborating with community organizations to provide material and non-material services.
- Creating a plan to occupy the patient's free time.
- Alleviating the anxieties and delusions that may negatively impact the patient's psychological state.

Of course, the responsibilities and roles of the social worker differ based on the nature of the illness, and they often play a crucial role in cases of chronic illnesses or those accompanied by emotional factors and psychological disorders alongside economic and environmental factors. Ben-Ghaleb illustrates the roles of the social worker in the medical field in serving the individual as follows: (Ben Ghaleb, nd, 177)

- 1) Receiving the patient upon their admission to the hospital and also after they are admitted to various departments in the hospital.
- 2) Opening a file for the patient that includes information about their illness, social circumstances, treatment methods, economic status, and work conditions.
- 3) Daily follow-up of patient cases in different hospital departments and responding to patient inquiries.
- 4) Addressing daily issues faced by patients in the hospital.
- 5) Writing a daily report about problems and submitting it to the hospital management.



- 6) Writing periodic reports about the type and volume of services, as well as the obstacles that hinder workflow and proposing ways to address them, and submitting this to hospital management.
- 7) Attempting to solve the economic problems of those facing difficult financial and economic situations and addressing work-related issues if they exist.
- 8) Conducting regular statistics on the social services provided to patients.
- 9) Studying the social aspects of the patients' psychological fields to integrate treatment with doctors and psychologists.
- 10) Carrying out work related to individual cases referred from the hospital administration and those applying as patients.
- 11) Gathering information about the patient's family and their circumstances to base the treatment plan on and provide doctors with information about the patient.
- 12) Following up on cases post-discharge from the hospital to ensure the treatment plan is on track and to prevent any mistakes or setbacks.
- 13) Providing psychological support to alleviate stress and anxiety for certain patients (diabetes, blood pressure, heart diseases, sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS, and kidney failure...etc).
- 14) Developing a social and psychological rehabilitation plan for the patient to live normally after completing treatment.
- 15) Raising family awareness about the dangers of the illness, its effects, how to deal with the patient in a truthful manner, and how to follow health guidelines to prevent the spread of the disease among family members.
- 16) Taking referral actions to other medical institutions for those whose conditions require it.
- 17) Contributing to educational and informational programs for community residents, both within and outside the medical institution.

- **The way community service works in the medical field:** Medical social work is fundamentally a humanitarian service. It aims to understand the patient's conditions and circumstances from all social, economic, and psychological aspects, preventing any emergencies that might arise from neglecting the key factors affecting the course of the illness, maximizing the benefits from the treatment plan, and speeding up the recovery process. The importance of medical social work is highlighted in assisting the hospital in achieving its goals and ensuring the best conditions for the therapeutic and social services provided to clients.

The roles of the social worker with patient groups involve the conscious use of various methods to engage with a group on one side while linking them to group activities on the other. The social worker relies on interpersonal relationships while also leveraging the relationship with the group as a whole, helping its members utilize their capabilities

and potential based on group interactions as a source of reducing tension and anxiety and boosting morale, especially if this group interaction is designed with specific scientific and practical considerations like age groups, gender, type and duration of illness, length of hospital stay, motivations, preferences, hobbies, psychological state, and divisions within the institution, etc. Additionally, there is a focus on health education and addressing collective issues among individuals in conscious and studied ways (relying on calm dialogue, directing discussions consciously, etc.).

In the medical field, the social worker takes advantage of group meetings to observe the effects of illness on patients' behavior and their reactions in different situations, helping patients accept their illness and adapt to the people around them.

Moreover, the medical social worker resorts to recreational activities and programs offered to patient groups to alleviate their pain and suffering, achieving mental health alongside physical health, and help them improve and strengthen their social relationships, whether with their fellow patients or their family members or medical staff in the institution. Recreational activities for patient groups are crucial for organizing free time, alleviating the pain and suffering patients experience, enhancing their morale, and restoring their confidence and hope in recovery and life while steering clear of all forms of discontent and despair. (el-Meligy, 2006, 103-104)

There are many programs and group activities that a medical social worker can engage in with patient groups to help them fulfill their functional roles. Examples include: (el-Meligy, 2006, 206, 207)

- ✓ Appropriate sports programs based on the patient's health condition, which may be required by medical treatment for the rehabilitation or re-qualification of certain illness cases.
- ✓ Recreational programs that aim to bring joy, comfort, and happiness to patients (especially those undergoing long-term treatment or lengthy hospital stays). These can take various forms, such as games, stories, theater, music parties, singing, and movie screenings. The social worker also works on forming patient groups based on their preferred hobbies.
- ✓ Cultural programs, which can be used to enhance patients' general knowledge and improve their health literacy regarding their illness in particular and health issues in general. This can be achieved by setting up or creating a library within the medical facility or by bringing in cultural books that align with the interests and preferences of the patients. Sometimes, patients may be encouraged to create and publish wall journals expressing their feelings, attitudes, interests, and releasing their pent-up emotions. Additionally, organizing lectures, seminars, religious, health, social, and political sessions, etc., and arranging group visits to surrounding community environments can help promote global health advocacy against infectious diseases.
- ✓ Social programs can be utilized to improve relationships among patients, between patients and their families, and between patients and medical staff, etc. These social programs may include hosting parties and seminars to facilitate acquaintance and strengthen bonds and relationships.

All of these programs are beneficial and can be harnessed to occupy free time, combat boredom, and divert negative thoughts about illness. The social worker should ensure that the group's goals align with the treatment objectives and consider the appropriate time for the group to engage in its activities and programs, ensuring they do not conflict with the medical facility's operations or cause disruption to any medical department's tasks, etc.

He must choose programs based on the physical, health, and psychological condition of the patients, taking individual differences into account when selecting programs and activities. He acts as a coordinator and a discussant for patient cases and the disease-related aspects, and as a behavior changer through group sessions. He plans to establish a supportive strategic plan, designs programs, observes changes in the disease, and conducts research to promote health awareness among patients and the community. Furthermore, he serves as an intermediary, directing patients to community assistance resources, such as charitable organizations.

- **Community organization in the medical field:** There are fundamental principles and criteria that the social worker adheres to in community organization. Typically, they cannot work alone without the efforts of multiple institutions, so they act as a social organizer and coordinator among these entities. The roles of the social worker include: (el-Meligy, 2006, 321, 322)

- Meeting the needs of patients through the existing social organizations in the community.
- Achieving cooperation with professionals from various fields within medical and non-medical institutions to serve clients.
- Identifying organizations that provide medical services in the community to benefit the healthcare institution.
- Conducting research and studies to identify the health needs and problems of the community and the capabilities of its individuals, institutions, and resources that help overcome its health issues and improve the health situation of its population.
- Guiding patients and their families to environmental resources for their benefit.
- Conducting social research on certain diseases to understand the impact of social and psychological factors.
- Advocating for patients' issues and defending their rights if they are unable to access the essential services they need.
- Organizing awareness campaigns among patients and the citizens served by the hospital concerning some seasonal diseases and their causes to take necessary precautions, including getting the required vaccinations.
- Organizing awareness campaigns among school and university students regarding certain negative phenomena such as addiction, environmental pollution, smoking, and other issues that need community prevention.

- Supporting relationships among staff in different hospital departments by organizing meetings between them on various occasions. (Social Work Research, 2011)
- Raising awareness among factory and workshop owners in the environment about the dangers of their disease-causing waste that negatively impact people's lives, and participating in conducting scientific research on the social problems of diseases and evaluating existing social programs. (Abu Rumman, 2018, 18)

### **Conclusion:**

In the end, the roles assigned to the social worker in the medical field regarding service methods with individuals and groups, and community organization, are complementary to the work of the medical team through the programs, activities, and efforts aimed at diagnosing, studying, and resolving the problems faced by patients in healthcare institutions as well as in the family and community settings. The social worker's design and implementation of preventive, therapeutic, and developmental programs aim to raise community health awareness and improve the quality of healthy living.

Moreover, we do not limit ourselves to merely addressing the patient as a client with a health issue; instead, we view them in light of their personal attributes and approach them from multiple dimensions, including psychological, social, cultural, and economic aspects. This also extends to collaborating with the entire medical team and managing the institution, as well as taking into account the patient's internal and external environment (hospital, family and friends, workplace, etc.), with the goal of providing the highest levels of assistance and enabling the patient and their family to benefit from treatment opportunities. This way, they can enhance their social performance, even if sometimes it requires a modification or change in their previous lifestyle (like work) to achieve adaptation, coexistence, and acceptance of the new situation with minimal harm.

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