

**Staff Welfare Unit
Career and Staff Support Service
UNHCR HQ**

**Managing the Stress
of
Humanitarian Emergencies**

Geneva, July 2001

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Foreword

Since the first version of this guide was issued in 1992, many things have evolved in the area of staff welfare. To mention some of them, our staff in the field have been exposed to numerous emergencies; the human resource policies were adapted to include care for the staff; the Staff Welfare Unit was established; a number of stress management training in the field has been conducted; and more.

As a consequence, we in the Staff Welfare Unit felt that it was necessary to update the old version and ensure that these experiences are shared with all of you. So again, we asked UNHCR's long time friend, Ms. Sheila Platt, the author of "Coping with stress in crisis situations" to review the old version and include new practical tools that the staff in the field could easily use. The Staff Welfare Unit ensured that the UNHCR experiences in dealing with stresses and traumas of our daily work were captured entirely.

The result is in front of you. While the theory remained the same, you will find some new tools intended to help you deal with your daily challenges. The checklist for managers can serve as an easy reminder of basic measures of care for staff. In listing them, we tried to remain as practical as possible in order to ensure easy application. Another practical tool is the Annex, a self-standing document (by courtesy of Community and Family Services International – CFSI) that you can easily separate from the brochure and take along to any emergency setting.

We hope you will enjoy the reading. Your feedback would be very welcome and it would serve us as a guideline for the further update. Our contact numbers are listed in Chapter 4 on Mobilizing Special Support. We do hope that we are closer to achieving our objective of raising awareness about impact of stress and trauma on humanitarian workers, but also promoting the care we can offer to each other wherever we are.

Staff Welfare Unit
Geneva, August 2001

1. Stress and UNHCR

1.1 Stress and Humanitarian Organizations

Responding to human needs within the context of complex organizations like UNHCR and the United Nations system places burdens on everyone involved in the effort. While this guide is focussed on stress management in humanitarian emergencies with particular reference to those serving in the field as managers and team leaders, it is a fact that staff throughout UNHCR are also subjected to stress wherever their workplace may be. They too are responding to emergency needs, and many identify closely with the field because they have served at field sites, as well as in supporting offices and at headquarters. The sources of stress in each location will be somewhat different, but also quite similar. Readers will recognize the information of stress reactions and hopefully will find the tips on stress management applicable to their own situation and work place.

1.2 The Risk of Stress in UNHCR Staff in Emergency Situations

UNHCR work in the field routinely involves responding to humanitarian emergencies. Staff at all levels find themselves involved in traumatic, distressing sights, sounds and situations. The spectacle of displacement, death and destruction, the suffering of survivors, and the intense pressure surrounding the assistance effort take their toll on those at and near the site, as well as on persons responsible in the region and at headquarters. All involved must remain effective for long hours in uncertain and often dangerous conditions, make decisions with limited information and resources, and function as part of a multi-lingual, multi-functional team assembled for the occasion.

Like other emergency response workers, UNHCR staff tend to be highly motivated individuals who are deeply committed to humanitarian work. They rise to challenges and are willing to put themselves in harm's way. However, their strong desire to help others often masks their own needs. Frequently, although they are technically proficient in various specialized skills, they are unaware of stress as a phenomenon that can affect work ability and performance. Accumulated stress affects not only personal morale and individual performance, but also organizational effectiveness. When the effects of stress are unrecognized and become negative, work suffers. Not only is there loss of productivity, but individuals may become frustrated to the point of leaving the field embittered, critical of the organization and filled with a personal sense of failure.

For all of these reasons, when starting a challenging work assignment, it is important to realize that stress will be present in various forms throughout the emergency event. Each stage will present challenges, from early-warning when the situation begins to develop, to crisis impact when people are fleeing, to aftermath, when the situation is resolving and staff begin to move on to new assignments.

UNHCR has become familiar with the particular stress associated with humanitarian work, and recognizes it as occupational in nature. No one responding to a humanitarian emergency is untouched by the experience. Therefore, stress reactions are seen as normal responses to

situations that are abnormal even though such situations are the routine responsibility of UNHCR.

The purpose of this guide is to help you, as a team manager:

- ❖ To be aware of the impact of stress on your staff and the work they do, as well as on yourself;
- ❖ To anticipate specific stress and vulnerability factors;
- ❖ To be prepared to support staff ability to work through all phases of an emergency avoiding breakdowns in functioning at both personal and organizational levels.

1.3 Role of UNHCR Team Leaders

Team leaders create the climate in which the work of their staff is accomplished. How leaders manage the challenges and complexities, the personal example they provide in terms of standards, response patterns and a model to emulate, are closely observed by those they work with and supervise. Staff look to them for guidance, spoken or unspoken. For these reasons it is vital for team leaders at all levels to be well-informed and knowledgeable about specific ways to help staff throughout the inevitable stress present at various stages of an emergency. The work force at emergency relief sights is resourceful and resilient. One of the keys to supporting them is to communicate about stress and how to manage it early in the emergency in ways that can be discussed within all levels of the work group. This may sound simple, but is not, because, as will be seen, communication itself is the behavior most sensitive to stress, and the most likely to suffer in difficult conditions. The fact that team leaders themselves must be seen to manage their own stress in ways that do not pass it on to others makes the information in this guide a vital management tool.

1.4 Using Information about Stress

When everyone involved has some knowledge about stress, terms and a framework within which to discuss it, the whole team becomes empowered to manage the stress particular to their situation. This guide provides a framework within which team leaders can use their own skills to carry out a three part consultative process of stress management as follows.

Recognizing the Signs of Stress

Suffering from stress in highly stressful circumstances is not unprofessional. Stress management starts with being aware that stress may cause problems and being able to recognize how these are manifested.

Identifying the Sources of Stress in the Current Work Situation

Once stress causing factors are identified, the work group can differentiate those sources of stress that are inevitable and must be lived with, from those which can be addressed by individual or group action.

Applying Stress Management Techniques in a Timely Fashion

Individuals, work groups and their organizations, recognizing stress as a routine occupational hazard, can attend to managing the stressful aspects of the assignment throughout different phases of the assistance effort.

The information that follows reflects the experience of UNHCR in the course of responding to an array of humanitarian emergencies, each with unique aspects and problems, but presenting common challenges in respect to maintaining the work force.

2. Recognizing Signs and Sources of Stress

2.1 What is Stress?

We tend to think of stress as a negative phenomenon that relates to pressure. In fact, stress is a neutral reaction to any change or challenge that requires one to do something in response. One might even characterize humanitarian workers as “stress seekers”, given their attraction to challenging tasks undertaken under difficult conditions. Varying life histories, work experience, personalities, and cultural backgrounds influence how a person reacts to new demands. Some people become energized and can work for long periods using all their abilities and training effectively. However, the extraordinary effort inherent in assisting large numbers of displaced people in humanitarian emergencies causes most of those responding to wonder at some point whether they can cope and keep on coping successfully without becoming overwhelmed. This is the essence of stress at the point when it may become “distress” if measures are not taken to manage it.

2.1.1 What are Sources of Stress for UNHCR?

General sources of stress in humanitarian work fall into several categories, introduced here, and expanded later in the text. Some are external to the individual person, and others generated from within.

Environment

Environmental stress may be the result of difficult climate, remote, isolated location, shortage of shelter, water and resources in general, dangerous conditions from militarized settings and crime, hazardous political climate, cultural or racist attitudes towards outsiders and “foreigners” and towards women. Of course each location and operation presents a unique set of challenges. For instance, recent operations in Eastern Europe assisting refugees and internally displaced persons in ongoing civil war conditions introduced some international staff used to working with culturally “different” recipients of service, to the stress of close identification with those they are assisting.

Organizational Environment

Some humanitarian organizations develop a “house culture” and environment that generate stress for the work force. Elements of the hierarchy, bureaucracy, allocation of resources and even the mission may be responsible for this effect. It is worth noting that management style is often cited in this regard.

Social and Interpersonal Factors

Sources of social stress may, at isolated postings, include forced intimacy and lack of social and recreational choices outside one's colleagues. Interpersonal stress may arise from co-worker conflicts, abrasive or unskilled supervision, dysfunctional colleagues, dissatisfied receivers of one's service, family problems, and problematical or unhealthy relationships with others.

Personality Factors

Some, but not all people who choose to involve themselves in human service work bring with them qualities of idealism and altruism. They set high personal standards, are results oriented and expect to be able to "make a difference" with their efforts to address needs and problems of others. These very qualities increase vulnerability to stress, especially when needs are overwhelming, resources are limited, or assistance is frustrated in other ways. Such people may become highly identified with the success or failure of the work, particularly in isolated work sites. They develop a sense of personal failure when there are setbacks. Perceptions of the world and general disposition are important factors in what we view as stressful and how we manage it.

Biological Factors

Biological sources of stress may include physical factors such as degree of fitness, acute or chronic physical illness, allergy, injury, trauma, or simple fatigue and exhaustion.

Psychological Factors

Sources of psychological stress may result from threats of physical harm, traumatic experiences of the past as well as the present, attacks on self esteem, lack of self confidence, feelings of insecurity.

2.1.2 How Do People Respond To Stress?

The body and mind are equipped for survival by an intricate system of hormonal, neuromuscular, mental, and psychological responses, which instantly arouse the entire being when faced by a perceived threat of any sort. These responses are consistent in human beings the world over, and are thought to be inherited from early adaptation to humankind's beginnings as a weaker creature subject to prey by larger animal species. Instinct may tell us to "fight" the threat, retreat from it, or simply become immobile; all responses that require modification appropriate to the circumstances and are to some extent governed by one's gender and culture. Recent research suggests that women's behaviors when faced with stress tend to differ somewhat from the classic "fight or flight" model. Women instead may tend to seek the support of others and take care of those around them.¹ However, the ability to mobilize and remobilize physical and mental coping continuously in extreme circumstances erodes over time as hormonal supplies become diminished and lose their protective function. At this point an individual begins to experience stress effects.

2.1.3 What Does Stress Look Like?

Stress reveals itself in five aspects appearing in physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and spiritual/philosophical reactions. Because each individual has characteristic ways of reacting to

¹ Shelley E. Taylor Ph.D., UCLA research group, *Psychological Review*, quoted in New York Times, 5/19/2000

it, responses to the same situation vary. Responses may also be both gender-specific and culturally defined or sanctioned. In addition to gender and culture, other factors affecting the number and intensity of stress reactions may include personality, personal history, training, previous disaster or humanitarian emergency experience and current life situation. Finally, stress reactions depend on the type of stress encountered.

2.1.4 What Types of Stress Affect Humanitarian Workers?

Team leaders need to be familiar with three types of stress.

Day-to-day Stress as one manages the competing demands of personal maintenance, transport, and work is most troublesome on arrival at the assignment. It is managed by establishing routines that tend to take less energy as the situation becomes familiar and the newcomer observes how others are coping.

Cumulative Stress is the most common, familiar and corrosive kind of stress encountered at humanitarian work sites. If unmanaged it erodes the effectiveness of both workers and work groups over time.

Critical Event Stress is a combination of acute responses to violence, trauma and threats to life. These require immediate attention from colleagues and the organization. Critical events cluster in emergency response situations, but may occur anywhere and at any time.

2.2 Recognizing Signs of Cumulative Stress

Cumulative Stress is pervasive and subtle. It occurs when a person suffers prolonged unrelieved exposure to a combination of personal, work, and situation-related factors that are

You, an experienced UNHCR worker, arrive at an emergency field site, and are delighted to find a former colleague who has been transferred directly from an operation well known for the frustration, difficulties and danger involved. However, your delight soon turns to concern. Your old friend does not look well. He seems to be subject to headaches for which he is taking many analgesics. He complains these are affecting his digestion. He looks exhausted and is often sleepy during the day, a real change from the healthy, energetic person he was when you last served together. You used to enjoy his steady good humour, but now find him rather moody and unpredictable. Previously an enthusiastic team player, he seems quite down on the organisation. One of your pleasures together was exercising by whatever means available. Now, however, your colleague avoids your invitations to work up a sweat. He also avoids conversation with you since you asked him if anything was wrong. You notice that many evenings he skips dinner, apparently preferring to drink alone, or with companions who also drink heavily. You wonder if you can sustain a friendship or even a productive working relationship.

causing frustration. The best defense against the harmful effects of any kind of stress is information about some of the more common signs and symptoms. Although stress is experienced in a highly individualized manner, the following list provides examples of what people suffering from cumulative stress may experience.

Physical Reactions

- extended fatigue
- physical complaints, headaches
- sleep disturbance
- appetite changes

Emotional Reactions

- anxiety
- feeling alienated from others
- desire to be alone
- negativism/cynicism
- suspiciousness/paranoia
- depression/chronic sadness
- feeling pressured/overwhelmed
- diminished pleasure
- loss of sense of humor

Cognitive Reactions

- tired of thinking
- obsessive thinking
- difficulty concentrating
- increased distractibility/inattention
- problems with decisions/priorities
- feeling indispensable/obsessions
- diminished tolerance for ambiguity
- constricted thought
- rigid, inflexible thinking

Behavioral Reactions

- irritability
- anger displacement, blaming others
- reluctance to start or finish projects
- social withdrawal
- absenteeism
- unwillingness to take leave
- substance abuse, self medication
- high alcohol consumption
- disregard for security, risky behavior

Spiritual/Philosophical Reactions

- doubt of value system/religious beliefs
- questioning the major life areas (profession, employment, lifestyle)
- feeling threatened and victimized
- disillusionment
- self-preoccupation

Team managers may notice a few of these signs in themselves or in team members as the emergency continues. Reactions may occur earlier in those who have come directly from other similar assignments without respite. When cumulative stress is neither recognized nor managed, reactions will multiply, appearing in most of the five categories. This is an indication that the individual concerned is at risk for the state of work-related exhaustion known as Burnout, discussed below.

2.2.1 Sources of Cumulative Stress in Humanitarian Operations

Job-related Stress

Generally managers as well as team members feel stressed by three aspects of the jobs they are performing in relation to the emergency at hand.

Pressure

Time pressure is pervasive. Immediate solutions are needed for an endless stream of urgent short or long term problems. Staff at all levels are struggling with large workloads of difficult tasks as well as heavy burdens of responsibility, often with lives at stake.

Demands

The work places many demands on both experienced and inexperienced staff, which may include:

- Long working hours, often in a state of fatigue, and for managers, across time zones.
- Uncomfortable/dangerous working conditions.
- Need to consistently demonstrate good judgement and rapid, clear thinking.
- Need to make decisions and set priorities in highly unstable conditions with uncertain information.
- Need to keep emotions under control in order to function and respond to needs of others where anxiety, fear and frustration are often present.

Role Responsibility

The assembled work force at a given work site, bringing a variety of experience and degrees of preparation to manage the roles assigned to them, typically experiences stress from a number of sources:

- Feelings of inadequacy when faced with new, unfamiliar tasks related to emergency conditions.
- Confusion and frustration if responsibilities are not clearly defined by supervisors.
- Conflict among staff if roles and lines of authority are not clearly defined to all involved.
- Conflicting priorities for supervisors who must complete operational work while meeting human needs of staff.
- Decisions regarding provision of public information weighed against operational and security considerations.
- Concern about neglecting one's family.

Organization-related Stress

Humanitarian organizations create stress for their staff when a number of factors are present, either in the management of the particular emergency, or in the organisation as a whole:

- Lack of emergency planning and failure to build on previous experience
- Unclear mission
- Conflicting policies and/or instructions
- Interagency conflicts and competition
- Inadequate support of staff and equipment
- Low recognition of worker accomplishment
- Stress management not a priority

As can be seen, some of these factors leading to build-up of cumulative stress and the reactions listed above, can be addressed by managers in ways that modify the negative impact on individuals and their work. Others seem to “go with the territory”. However, failure to recognize the problem over time, does increase the risk of burnout, especially among the most dedicated and experienced staff.

2.3 Recognizing Signs of Burnout

Burnout is an occupational hazard for human service providers the world over. It occurs when a person becomes exhausted by too great a conflict between their own needs and the requirements of work to which they are devoted. Like cumulative stress, burnout is experienced in a highly individual manner. As can be seen below, it affects both co-workers and work, especially when the burned out person holds a supervisory position. The person may be either avoiding work, or become totally involved in it to the exclusion of any other activities. Burnout is disabling and costly to the organization. It can be avoided if effective organizationally supported stress management is in place.

The following is not a comprehensive list. However, it provides examples both of what people who are suffering from burnout may experience, and of what their colleagues may notice about them.

2.3.1 Signs of Burnout in Individuals

Physical Reactions

- loss of energy, chronic fatigue
- frequent and prolonged colds
- headaches
- sleep problems (insomnia, nightmares, excessive sleeping, interrupted sleep, early awakening)

Stressors Causing Burnout: Frustrated Goals and Expectations

Dr. L

Department of Humanitarian Affairs Training Course (1993) listed the primary causes of burnout among humanitarian staff as follows:

- Inability to make the organisation perform according to expectations
- Unwanted organisational changes
- Organisational policies
- Lack of support from top management
- Top management interference
- Unmotivated workers
- Unrealistic expectations
- Lack of recognition

- ulcers, gastro-intestinal disorders
- weight loss or gain
- flare-up of pre-existing medical disorder
- injuries from high-risk behavior
- muscular pain (neck, low back)
- increased premenstrual syndrome

Emotional Reactions

- depression
- helplessness
- feeling trapped
- irritability/anger
- frustration
- fear of "going crazy"
- over-reactions/under-reactions

Behavioral Reactions

- absenteeism
- increased consumption (caffeine, tobacco, alcohol, drugs)
- tardiness
- difficulty expressing oneself verbally or in writing
- accident prone
- poor performance/reduced effectiveness
- disrespect
- over-activity/underactivity
- decrease in quality of services
- unwillingness to take leave
- risk-taking

Attitudinal Reactions

- disillusionment
- low morale
- focus on "failures"
- loss of emotional meaning of work
- distrust
- cynicism towards colleagues and organization; receivers of service; about self and own role

2.3.2 Signs of Burnout in the Work Group

- high job turnover
- increased sick leave
- clique formation
- scape-goating (blaming one individual for every problem)
- frequent conflicts
- lack of initiative
- lowered work output

Managers need to know, for their own good as well as for the protection of their staff, that burnout is avoidable. The signs of the condition are often more obvious to colleagues than to the individual. Highly skilled and talented emergency staff recruited by their organization for service at one emergency after another without respite can enter into a state of chronic exhaustion, accompanied by loss of perspective that inhibits their ability to advocate for themselves. Measures to assist the burned out person are discussed in *Addressing Burnout* below on page 26.

2.4 Crisis Situations and Critical Events

Humanitarian emergencies are frequently crisis situations, each with distinct features, but sharing certain characteristics.

It is important to be aware that certain types of crisis may have a more severe impact on staff than others:

- **Sudden and unexpected refugee flows** for which little or no preparation has been possible are highly stressful. The mass movement Kosovars into Macedonia and Albania in 1999 is an example.
- **Human-caused incidents** that could have been prevented often cause longer-lasting anger than natural events like floods. The scorched earth tactics carried out by militia against citizens in East Timor following the vote for independence in September 1999 are an example.
- **Unseen dangers with unpredictable consequences** (e.g. epidemics) may cause great anxiety and insecurity amongst staff. The outbreak of Ebola Virus in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1995 is an example.
- **Critical Incidents** of a totally unanticipated nature and occurring at night increase disorientation which adds to the difficulty of coordinating a response. Armed attack during the night on a remote compound by rebels or criminals when none were known to be in the area is an example.
- **Occurrence in significant season** such as Christmas, Ramadan or on a nationally observed day in a given country or culture, may increase impact. People tend to make negative symbolic interpretations connected to the timing and its relevance in their own culture or nationality. The murder of five ICRC medical staff in Chechnya just before Christmas in 1996 causing widespread grief and concern in the humanitarian community is an example.

Crisis Phases

Research on emergency and disaster work has identified a series of emotional phases that staff responding to the situation experience:

The **impact** phase covering:

- a) to adjust to imminent involvement
- b) mobilisation - staff are briefed, preparation for action, often with a certain degree of disorganisation and disorientation
- c) action - “heroic” phase; long hours of concentrated effort and activity; total exhaustion or “flameout” can sideline workers if protective routines are not in place. (See Checklists for Managers page 20)

The **aftermath** phase- staff and the situation move to more normal routine; an intensely emotional period if feelings suppressed during the impact phase now come to the surface.

The **recovery** phase- individuals become reconciled to powerful experiences encountered during the crisis. Ability to move on to a more balanced life depends, in part, on the kind of support made available by the organisation. See (Mobilising Special Support page 25)

2.4.1 *Staff Vulnerability and Resilience*

Managers and staff responding to a crisis or emergency situation come with a variety of histories and characteristics that influence reactions to stress. Some of the positive factors below increase resilience. In contrast, the negative factors listed may create vulnerability.

	Positive Factors	Negative Factors
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good health - Successful previous crisis experience; development of “survival skills” - Crisis seen as a challenge - Focus on solutions - Supportive family/friends/colleagues, no additional outside demands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Health problems - Extremely high self expectations - Crisis seen as a threat to personal competence - Unresolved emotional reactions from previous trauma or personal loss - Personal/family problems – additional demands/stress
Interpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Well balanced personality, able to accept/give support within team - Good communication skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal ties/identification with traumatized victims - Personality problems – unable to accept available support
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Existence of strong leadership - Reliable public information exchange - Well-planned, practiced emergency procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leadership problems - Poor/disrupted public information - Close scrutiny by media and observers

2.4.2 *Recognizing Critical Events*

Critical Events are sudden, violent occurrences that threaten or claim life. They may be large or small scale, but are thought of as being beyond the range of “normal” human experience, even in the context of humanitarian emergency work, because of their power to shock and traumatize staff involved. Examples are deaths of colleagues in the line of work, deaths among those being assisted, especially children, personal encounter with violence such as being kidnapped or held hostage and witnessing any event described as an “atrocity”.

Those exposed to critical events may experience numerous stress reactions either immediately or at any time in the period of weeks, months, and years following the incident. Team leaders need to be aware that individual circumstances and life histories of certain staff may create special vulnerability with the potential of intensifying stress effects. Among these are extreme youth, a recent significant personal loss, such as death or divorce, a close relationship to human or property casualties caused by the event, and previous traumatic experience related to service with UNHCR or another agency, or in personal life. It is important to be aware that UNHCR staff are often survivors of critical events for which no assistance or special support was provided. This may result in a “stress burden” added to reactions to the present event.

2.4.3 *Recognizing Signs of Critical Event Stress*

Immediate Reactions

The following is not a comprehensive list, but provides examples of what people may experience in the period during or immediately following a critical event. The persons involved may feel very unlike themselves but remain unaware that their ability to function may be temporarily quite impaired. For this reason, supervisors as well as colleagues need to be familiar and able to recognize this situation in order to provide protection as needed.

Physical Reactions

- nausea, gastro-intestinal distress
- Sweating, shivering
- faintness, dizziness
- muscle tremors/weakness
- elevated heartbeat, respiration
- uncoordinated movements
- extreme fatigue/exhaustion
- headache

Emotional Reactions

- rapidly shifting emotions
- anxiety, fear
- guilt/survivor guilt
- exhilaration, survivor joy
- anger
- sadness
- helplessness/feeling overwhelmed
- detachment, feeling unreal
- emotional numbness
- feeling out of control, vulnerable

Cognitive Reactions

- difficulty concentrating
- racing, circular thoughts
- slowed thinking
- memory problems
- confusion/disorientation
- impaired problem-solving, calculations
- difficulty making decisions
- intrusive images of the event (flashbacks)
- loss of perspective

Behavioural Reactions

- startle response/restlessness
- difficulty expressing oneself
- constant talking of the event
- arguments
- withdrawal
- exaggerated, "gallows" humour

- slowed reactions/accident proneness
- inability to rest or let go

Spiritual Reactions

- profound loss of trust

Delayed Reactions

Many people are surprised by the aftermath of a critical event. While we wish the event to be "over," persistent or delayed reactions are common. Team managers and others whose responsibilities or coping style require a high degree of emotional control during a critical event may find themselves reacting at any time afterwards in some ways noted below. For most people reactions gradually decrease until a person feels more or less like themselves in a few weeks. The reappearance of reactions around the anniversary of the critical event, or in response to a similar occurrence, is not unusual. However, it often surprises the individual.

Physical reactions

- Sleep disturbances
- Nightmares
- Aches and pains
- Appetite and digestive changes
- Lowered resistance to colds and infection
- Persistent fatigue

Emotional Reactions

- Mood swings, feeling unstable
- Anxiety, fear of recurrence
- Depression, grief
- Irritability, hostility
- Self-blame, shame
- Fragility, feeling vulnerable
- Numbness, detachment
- Fear of "contaminating" loved ones if share difficult experience

Cognitive Reactions

- Intrusive memories
- Reactivation of previous traumatic events
- Preoccupation with event

Behavioral Reactions

- Avoidance of reminders of the event
- Social relationship disturbances
- Difficulty connecting with "outsiders"
- Lowered activity level
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs (self medication for depression, anxiety)

Spiritual Reactions

- "Why me" struggle

- Increased cynicism
- Loss of self confidence
- Loss of purpose
- Renewed faith in higher being
- Profound existential questioning
- Loss of belief in cooperative spirit of mankind
- Disillusionment

2.4.4 Recognizing “Covert” Critical Events

Unfortunately, there is a category of critical event known to many, but often not recognized or addressed by the organization in which it occurs. Hence the term “covert” or hidden. These events involve conduct or actions by colleagues within the organization that cause harm, damage or danger to fellow workers, receivers of service or to the organization. The higher the person is placed in the organization, the more severe the stress experienced by staff.

Examples of Covert Critical Events

- Substance abuse by colleague involving impaired functioning at work and in the community
- Risk-taking flaunting security considerations and endangering others
- Pattern of ethical violations ignored/not addressed by organization
 - Fiscal irregularities and malfeasance
 - Inappropriate behavior/relationships with receivers of service
- Sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances
- Persistent negative attitude and behavior by superior, unwarranted by employee performance

Stress emanating from such events or conduct may be manifested as an atmosphere of resentment, anger and fear of retaliation as well as pervasive poor morale affecting productivity.

2.4.5 Sources of Stress in Critical Events

Certain features of traumatic events within humanitarian settings typically produce powerful responses in those exposed to the actual event. Colleagues who were not actually present, but who identify closely with those actually involved may also experience stress emanating from the event. As can be seen, sometimes the source of stress is rooted in the event itself. However, powerfully experienced internal reactions can be equally stressful.

Personal Loss

- Death or serious injury of colleagues
- Guilt about survival when others have been killed
- Vanished sense of invulnerability if personally injured or attacked

Traumatic Exposure

- Horrific experience: example: encountering mutilated remains of genocide victims,
- Witnessing death and suffering
- Caring for distraught survivors

- Responsibility for triage, life and death decisions
- Work in physically dangerous and/or psychologically hazardous conditions

Mission Failure

- Self blame when intense efforts fail and lives are lost
- Loss of confidence in colleagues and/or organization
- Dismay when assistance efforts cause harm

Media Coverage

- Outsider observation/criticism of work
- Inaccurate or danger-increasing reporting of situation
- Overanxious supervision resulting from media scrutiny
- Anxiety about performance

Outrage

- Anger at those perceived as responsible for the crisis
- Frustration at being target, i.e. of warring factions, of refugee's anger and despair
- Resentment of impact of politics on humanitarian aid
- Abandonment by outside resources (donors)
- Insoluble ethical conflicts

2.5 Communication and Stress

Communication is highly sensitive to stress, and requires specific attention by Managers. A glance at the various reactions to cumulative stress, burnout and critical incidents will confirm that many of the items mentioned impact the way the person is communicating. The effect on communication in the organization is often quite negative

2.5.1 Personal Communication Styles

Most of us have some idea of our personal communication style. We are usually aware that when stressed we tend either to become more withdrawn and quieter, or more talkative and louder. Some alternate between withdrawn behavior, keeping thoughts and feelings to themselves, and outbursts that may be surprising to themselves as well as to others.

Managers need to be aware of their own communication patterns in periods of high stress, and whether these increase or ameliorate the stress of those they supervise. Needless to say, employees suffer when their supervisor's communication style is eruptive ('She just suddenly screams at us') or abusive ('He really humiliated our group, calling us names in front of visitors'). Managers known for their integrity will often exhibit a consistent and calm way of communicating, and the content of the information they share will be known to be credible.

2.5.2 Communication in the Multicultural Work Group

Cross-cultural teams face the challenge of communicating through differences in language and customs. In stressful times when everyone, at some level, wants to be taken care of and comforted, we tend to regress, seeking the familiar. In a multicultural, multilingual group

people may find it suddenly more difficult to speak or write a second language. Many report that interpreting tasks become more onerous, requiring extra efforts. Inevitably when some are finding comfort with colleagues who speak the same mother tongue, others who do not share the language may feel left out. Splits in a previously cohesive work group may appear as a result, and communication difficulties affecting the work become obvious.

Examples of stress effects on communication can be seen in problems involving messages.

- Mixed messages with unclear content
- Inaccurate messages
- Missing messages
- Inappropriate messages (personal content in professional documents)
- Upsurge in gossip and rumor

The list is not comprehensive, but it does reflect the fact that we do not listen as well when feeling stressed. Once managers recognize these problems as related to stress, they can be addressed and worked on. This will avoid further distress caused by neglecting the problem and allowing it to get worse, or blaming individuals involved. Establishing a clear chain of command covering responsibilities at all levels of the organizational hierarchy from HQ to the field is an effective first step to avoiding communication problems in the first place.

3. Stress Management Strategies

Setting a good example as a manager is the first step in effective stress management. Given their general devotion to the work of an emergency and the relentless needs posed by such situations, both managers and individual workers seem to need “permission” to take care of themselves, even in the most basic ways. Managers need to pay close attention to managing stress on a personal level, especially at the beginning phase of an emergency when demands are heaviest. Just as cabin crew on aircraft instructs parents to put on their own oxygen masks before attending to their children, leaders with responsibility for the well-being and work output of others need to set an early and consistent example of basic self care. For any message about stress management to be authentic, those in charge of others should be seen following their own advice. Experienced leaders and others who successfully sustain their own effectiveness and work well with their teams and with the organization during the whole length of an emergency assignment, pay attention to specific aspects of their personal routine. They monitor themselves and support others to do the same.

3.1 Basic Stress Management

Stress management in the first place starts with an individual. However, the managerial style and the supportive collegial environment are extremely important as well. Here are some ideas for each of the mentioned areas of stress management.

3.1.1 Self Care

Exercise, depending on the physical output involved in one's work, is a key to remaining strong as well as to relieving tension. Field sites may present limited choices, but resourceful managers identify these and encourage colleagues to use them. Even twenty minutes most days, of an activity that involves the whole body and raises respiration and heartbeat, will have benefits. Physical and mental fitness go together. The qualities of strength, flexibility and reliability in one's physical being translate to mental attitudes as well. Twenty minutes is a small investment for a significant improvement in energy and well being.

Nutrition in remote locations is a challenge as to both the content and timing of healthy balanced meals. Skipping meals, forgetting to drink fluids, and overdoing on sugar, fatty snacks and alcohol can create nutritional stress. Managers and work groups can turn to health-trained colleagues for advice on healthy eating choices at a given work site.

Rest and Sleep requirements vary among individuals, but the relentless and urgent demands of providing emergency assistance lead to fatigue and exhaustion unless monitored. Individuals are responsible for keeping themselves adequately rested, but cannot do so unless managers establish routines for the group that allow for adequate sleep as well as periodic rest at, near or away from the site. (See *Sustaining the Workforce: Checklists for Managers*, page 21 below for further details on this topic)

Relaxation and healthy pleasures are individually chosen to meet individual needs for time out and a brief shift of focus away from the demands of work. Each work site will have music lovers, game players, colleagues who cook for pleasure, and those who find solace in nature. Letting ones self-pause to watch the sunset is a healthy pleasure that actually releases soothing substances into the brain. Activities like those above allow people to restore themselves and manage stress at the same time. A manager who finds time for respite will benefit personally while setting an example for staff to do likewise.

Balance of official and private life is important for managers as well as team members. This applies to routine at the emergency site, but should also encompass planned for time off away from the site. No one should feel essential to the team twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Managers are responsible for allotting responsibilities and back-up so that the whole team is able to get individual respite on a regular basis.

3.1.2 Responsive Leadership Style

Managers who are able to lead their teams effectively and inspire loyalty in trying conditions have ways of going about their work that are perceived by staff as both supportive and responsive:

Attitude of Open Communication

Stress is significantly reduced when staff feel they have access to facts about the situation, an effective way of checking out rumors and avenues for addressing immediate concerns. Open communication implies a sensitivity to gender and culture issues as well.

Availability

Visible leadership in times of crisis is reassuring. Staff respond positively to supervisor who visit their work stations and provide encouragement including constructive comments on how the work is going.

Awareness of Reactions

Stress is alleviated when supervisors can anticipate and recognize a variety of reactions to developments and critical events among staff and respond helpfully. This requires good timing as well as sensitivity to cultural traditions and gender roles.

Acknowledgment of loss

Timely and formal acknowledgment of deaths enables staff to begin mourning. Sadly, grief leadership is a necessary skill for managers. When culturally sensitive it is experienced as highly supportive by staff.

Appreciation of efforts

Staff at all levels need to feel that their work has been noticed and is appreciated. It is important in the typically chaotic conditions of emergency response that individuals, sooner rather than later, hear from superiors that their work is actually making a difference. Such recognition needs, of course, to be timely as well as accurate.²

3.1.3 The Buddy System

One highly important element of successful team functioning is the mutual support provided by a “buddy system”. Managers discuss with their team how severe fatigue and lack of food affect judgement and job effectiveness. They acknowledge to themselves, and remind others, that an exhausted person is not the best judge of his/her own efficiency. People at all levels in the organization can be encouraged to pick a congenial and trustworthy colleague, discuss how each of them typically exhibits stress and fatigue, and agree to keep an eye on each other. The team leader, who tells a colleague, “*Remind me to eat, and get me out of here by nine. I’m no good after a fourteen hour stretch for the third day in a row*”, is setting a positive example for the staff.

3.2 Sustaining the Workforce: Checklist for Managers

Checklists can be extremely useful tools for monitoring staff needs as well as performance during the course of a difficult emergency assignment. The following is not exhaustive, but can be added to or subtracted from to conform to the requirements of the particular emergency.

² Adapted from G. Lewis *Critical Events and Trauma*, 1994

3.2.1 *Everyday Care*

Create a Supportive Climate

- ❑ Social support is a key barrier against the harmful effects of stress. Supervisors can assist their team by creating and maintaining a supportive climate in which to carry out the work of the emergency.
- ❑ Supervisors and team leaders have a major responsibility to clearly give permission, both to themselves and to their team members, for self-care adequate to sustain energy. It is their responsibility to check that this approach is followed throughout the rescue and relief effort.
- ❑ This responsibility begins with assembling needed supplies, equipment and space allocation in readiness for 24-hour coverage of the emergency situation.

Establish Routines

- ❑ Institute shifts with breaks and rotation of workers from higher to lower stress tasks. Have this in place to greet arriving workers.
- ❑ Provide an example by rotating tasks, eating and resting, and check that members of the team do likewise.
- ❑ Plan the work, giving clear assignments and instructions. Make out a list that includes “hard” tasks requiring efficiency and skill, (example: logging information) and a separate list of “soft” tasks which can be performed by people whose ability has been temporarily impaired by shock, fear and stress, (examples: food preparation, cleaning).
- ❑ Establish a “buddy system” of pairs of workers who agree to exchange information about each other’s stress signals and then keep an eye on each other to mutually remind about self-care. Select a personal buddy yourself.

Manage Information

- ❑ Provide briefing to arriving workers that orients them to the current situation, and prepares them for the most difficult and traumatic aspects of the emergency scenario. Include cultural information for workers arriving from out of area.
- ❑ Arrange for workers to receive regular information about the well being of their families and vice-versa.
- ❑ Organize rumor control and periodic situation reports.
- ❑ Connect worker’s individual tasks to the whole rescue effort, to give meaning to the work and lessen frustration. Avoid criticism when possible. Don’t assume that people know they are doing a good job.
- ❑ Establish end of shift sessions to exchange information, anticipate next steps and support workers leaving and arriving at the scene.

Monitor Health and Well-being

- ❑ Assign the task of health monitor to a team member, giving that person authority to oversee food provision, and to enforce rest and refreshment breaks.
- ❑ Instruct team members to eat, drink fluids and take the periodic breaks recommended. Set an example yourself by agreeing to be reminded about breaks for food, rest and sleep.
- ❑ Ensure the work area has toilet facilities, first aid kit with analgesics, drinking water, appropriate snacks and drinks.
- ❑ Provide a rest area apart from the work with blankets, pillows, and reading material.
- ❑ Encourage no smoking in the work area, but do allow smoking in some designated place.

Attend to Nutrition

- ❑ Emergency work places great demands on the body. Certain levels of food and fluid intake are needed when the body is under stress. Overload of caffeine should be avoided. Caffeine raises anxiety and interferes with needed sleep in susceptible people. If team members cannot leave the work area for meals, every effort should be made to have hot food brought in to supplement snacks.
- ❑ Provide frequent small meals if possible. Snacks containing the kind of non-perishable items on the list below should be prepared in advance and kept on hand:

fruit (fresh and/or dried)

decaffeinated tea, coffee, soft drinks

milk

high protein snacks: cereal bars, nuts etc.

fruit juices

mineral water

Monitor Alcohol Consumption

- ❑ Provide education about the tendency in emergency operations to drink beyond the initial relaxing effect of a glass of wine and to numb crisis impact with evenings of drinking.
- ❑ Staff need to know how immoderate alcohol consumption places additional stress on both body and psyche. It affects metabolism, sleeping habits, is in itself a depressant, and causes hangovers, all detrimental to the health and efficiency of the crisis team.

Provide Exercise Opportunities

- ❑ Workers who are fit and exercise regularly may need exercise sessions during the acute period if their task assignment involves inactivity. Any sort of stretching, movement or exercise, during a break or after a shift, releases tension and helps to maintain stamina and general good health. Stairs, if available, a jump rope, and weights or any other practical, safe aids to exercise may be used if the team is in confined circumstances.

Monitor Stress Levels

- ❑ Support the health monitor, observe worker's appearance as well as performance and adherence to on-off routines.
- ❑ Identify and support vulnerable team members who may suddenly show multiple signs of stress. Be prepared to provide prompt assistance in the form of a break with immediate support, brief rest and refreshment, a chance to talk about what is bothering the person, and support for coping. Identify staff appropriate to supportive roles including both male and female team members within specific language and culture groups. Consider temporary reassignment to "soft" task with companionship for the affected person. National staff, who are often less experienced and closer to a traumatic situation involving citizens of their own culture and country may fall into this vulnerable category, but no staff member is immune.

Vulnerability factors may include:

- extreme youth and inexperience
- loss of home
- relationship to or close identification with those being assisted
- distressing work episode involving traumatic exposure
- long task isolated from other workers
- personal injury
- recent significant loss in family, connected or unconnected to current emergency
- concurrent life crisis, such as divorce, illness of family member

- previous life or work-related trauma surfacing with recurrent symptoms

3.2.2 *Support for Critical Events*

The nature of humanitarian work requires that staff adopt a calm, efficient methodical approach to their work, suppressing feelings in order to respond to a crisis. However, most people will have particularly strong internal reactions to critical events, as seen above. There are two types of typical behaviours that we need to watch out for:

- *Suffering in Silence:* Many people have tended to interpret the typical array of stress responses to events such as genocide or deaths of colleagues, as “something is wrong with me”. In many cases they have suffered in silence, partly from lack of knowledge about the normality of their reactions, and partly from having no one to share them with. This is frequently compounded by self-criticism.
- *Keeping a Stiff Upper Lip:* In order to spare families and friends from being upset at their grief, anger and horror, many develop the “stiff upper lip” attitude and, instead of working through the recovery pattern, their suppressed feelings caused prolonged suffering at physical and/or emotional levels.

In preparing the support to the staff following critical events, it is important to pay attention to the following aspects:

Accommodate the Staff

In order to create an environment in which people may express themselves freely, the following steps are recommended for work groups in the immediate aftermath of a critical event:

- Allow time for bathing, change of clothes and a meal in privacy and comfort. Staff should not feel they have to face anybody, including supervisors or colleagues, before they are ready.
- As Team leader, welcome the group in person if possible, or designate your personal representative to do so. One or two staff from the office should be freed up to take care of needs and provide the link between the group and the office, as meeting a large group of colleagues can be overwhelming.

Arrange for Defusing (“Informal Debriefing”)

Defusing often happens naturally as people come together at the end of the day and spontaneously discuss events. However, in the wake of a critical event involving staff, defusing should be organized to provide a more structured and protected environment in which those involved can express and share their experience.

- *Session Leader:* the defusing session should be guided by a trained person if possible. In the absence of specialized health or mental health personnel, managers can initiate conversation about the event with the group. The session leader should be familiar with typical stress reactions (See *Recognizing Signs of Critical Event Stress* page 15 above). Another resource is *Basic Stress Management for Difficult Assignments* in Annex 1, pg. 29, below. It provides a useful guide to subjective experience of critical events.

- ❑ *Support and Privacy*: every effort should be made to keep the discussion supportive as well as protective of the privacy of those present. Expression of strong emotions makes people feel vulnerable. Angry feelings should be recognized as a normal response to a violent, upsetting event, and staff should be able to “let off steam” about these. Criticism of professional performance is not appropriate, and should be held for a Lessons Learned meeting in which the event is reviewed from a different perspective.
- ❑ *Educational Focus*: Discussion of different physical, emotional, cognitive and other reactions that may be experienced in the circumstances should emphasize how normal these are. Team leaders, backed by a health trained staff member if one is available, can offer suggestions on what to anticipate and how to cope.
- ❑ *Critical Event Aftermath*: Because some staff will experience delayed reactions, managers should monitor stress levels in the weeks following a critical event. If these are causing concern the Staff Welfare Officer should be consulted about further levels of post-event support needed, either for individuals or the whole group experiencing the event. (See *Mobilizing Special Support*, 25 below).

Critical Event Debriefing

A Critical Event Debriefing is a structured talk through the details of the event facilitated by a trained person. It may be recommended if the event was severe, and if stress levels remain high to the point that both well-being of staff and work performance are affected. Such debriefings have been developed as a way of protecting the health and performance of staff. They provide an opportunity to modify stress reactions both in the immediate aftermath of a difficult event and in the longer term. Personal and group tension is reduced, and the team becomes more supportive of its members as a result.

3.3 Managing Transition

Managers need to be sensitive to the actual completion of the emergency phase and the need to make the transition to the slower, more frustrating work of finding durable solutions. This is a shift in perspective, which can be missed when the situation has been in the limelight and scrutinized by media with accompanying pressure and deadlines. Everyone is immersed in the work and used to operating at full throttle. However, when managers and the organization fail to realize that “emergency mode” in terms of work and leave schedules as well as task assignment and even staffing is no longer needed or even appropriate, the result is additional stress for staff. The post-emergency phase has its own set of requirements. Workers leaving the scene and those staying but addressing different tasks naturally experience stress as they “shift gears”. Supervisors can arrange supportive activities and make changes themselves which will model ways of coping with the stress of the let-down period after an intense initial emergency experience.

- ❑ Arrange for a team opportunity to discuss their personal experience during the emergency impact and initial response period. Formal stress debriefing is an option if critical events have not been processed, and if an appropriate trained facilitator is available. (See *Mobilizing Specialized Support* page 27 below)

- ❑ Hold “lessons learned” sessions, encouraging the participation of all the staff, to provide constructive opportunities for workers at every level to discuss, evaluate and analyze procedures and the work.
- ❑ Assist in re-establishing regular work and personal routines as soon as possible.
- ❑ Set an example for fellow workers through self-care, recognising limits and getting necessary sleep.
- ❑ Make time for regular recreational or “time out” activities and encourage others to do so to help overcome post-emergency phase reactions.
- ❑ Give recognition and appreciation for work performed.
- ❑ Attend to possible need for ceremonies or rituals to honor losses.
- ❑ Encourage team members to reconnect with family and friends. Trauma is isolating, but accounts of what happened and some information about normal stress reactions will help both staff and their families during the emergency crisis period and after it is over.
- ❑ Arrange for R&R or reassignment if a staff member’s health and future functioning are at risk. (See *Addressing Burnout* page 26 below)
- ❑ Provide information and a handout to help explain disaster stress

Handout for Staff

In the Annex 1, *Basic Stress Management for Difficult Assignments* is designed as a brief guide to be distributed to staff undertaking emergency assignments. It will be most effective when introduced to teams by holding a session, early in the emergency operation, at which managers, the security officer and staff at all levels can review the various points together. This will create a vocabulary as well as framework for attending to stress as a normal and predictable factor needing to be monitored by both individuals and work groups at emergency sites, as well as by managers. The session can be repeated for personnel arriving at various stages. An effort should be made to provide a session as well as written translation of the guide in local language as appropriate.

3.4 Addressing Burnout

Managers can be helpful to those they supervise in respect to identifying and facing up to the need to do something about burnout. However, given the difficulties listed below, if you, the manager are suffering from burnout, it is wise to avail yourself of whatever assistance is available to do something about meeting your own needs.

People who experience burnout may have difficulties with:

- Making objective evaluations
- Deciding priorities
- Finding alternatives

People who experience burnout may have negative changes in attitude towards:

- Their colleagues and organization
- Those to whom service is being offered
- Themselves

People who experience burnout may need assistance in:

- Leaving their current work situation

- Taking extended respite or leave
- Addressing medical problems
- Rethinking their career path
- Developing a recovery plan incorporating stress management
- Refocusing life and work to encompass a balance of giving and receiving

4. Mobilizing Special Support

While it seems natural to provide support to colleagues suffering from stress, many that have tried report that this task is neither simple nor easy. We hesitate to be intrusive, wondering if we are saying the right thing or unintentionally making things worse. We worry that our efforts might trigger emotional outbursts that would be difficult to handle. Sometimes we are simply rebuffed by those we would like to help. Although the information in this guide can be helpful, sometimes the situation requires assistance from a resource with special training and experience.

4.1 The Staff Welfare Unit

UNHCR has recognized the impact of the working environment on stress levels of its personnel and mandated just such a resource in the form of the Staff Welfare Unit located in Geneva. This office provides assistance to staff members and their families suffering from stress, either in extreme situations in the field, or in more normal work locations. The personnel of the Unit will assist either by mobilizing a local professional resource if one is available, or by visiting the field site to provide appropriate intervention. Sometimes advice by telephone is sufficient, and the unit welcomes calls just to discuss situations that are causing concern. The strict confidentiality will be respected and no further action will be taken without consent of the staff member concerned.

The unit is reachable via the geographical desk or via the Field Staff Safety Section. Direct access is via the phone numbers:

41-22-739-7947
41-22-739-8317
41-22-739-7858

Access via a confidential fax line, 41-22-739-7370 is also available. Finally, we will be happy to welcome you on our UNHCR Intranet site: [Staff Corner/Staff Welfare](#).

4.2 Peer Support Personnel Network

Peer Support Personnel is a term describing a staff member who volunteers to offer support to his or her work colleagues by:

- Helping staff to deal with the everyday stress and strain caused by their UNHCR assignments;
- Providing individual and confidential consultation as required by staff;
- When appropriate, initiating the first contact with those who are showing signs of distress;
- Contacting the Staff Welfare Officers in case of severe problems;

- Assisting in assessing the needs for psychosocial interventions after traumatic events; and
- Assisting in family support services.

Members of the UNHCR Peer Support Personnel Network have undertaken a skill development programme organised by the Staff Welfare Unit. So far, we have 38 trained staff based mostly in Africa. They were all trained in the basic counselling skills to deal with stress and trauma and at later stage with other problems either work related or personal that may impact on individual's day to day functioning.

Peer Support Personnel are co-ordinated by the Staff Welfare Unit and are abided by the oath of confidentiality. They may be able to help an individual directly, by provision of some further information, or by finding the appropriate referral. We warmly encourage you to check if your office has anybody who is a member of the Network.

In Conclusion

Thank you for reading through this guide. It includes the wisdom and experience of many colleagues, shared here in the hope that it will of value in preserving the health, safety and morale of all who read it. UNHCR, like other humanitarian organizations, considers its world wide staff as its most precious and valuable asset. It is hoped that managers, team leaders and other readers will be able to use the information provided to support those they work with and take care of themselves as well throughout the ups and downs of emergency assignments. The guide brings wishes to all for productive and rewarding experience in emergency work.

References for further reading:

Hartsough, D., & Myers, D. *Disaster work and Mental Health*, National Mental Health Knowledge Exchange Network, P.O. Box 42490, Washington DC 20015, 1995

Paton, D., *Disaster Relief Work: Assessment of Training Effectiveness*, Journal of Traumatic Stress 7:2, pages 275-288. 1994

Claudia Herbert & Ann Wetmore: *Overcoming Traumatic Stress: A self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioral Techniques*, Robinson, London, 1999

Annex 1

BASIC STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR DIFFICULT ASSIGNMENTS: Notes for Staff Assigned to Emergencies⁴

When starting a challenging work assignment such as a refugee emergency, it is important to be aware that stress will be present at all stages of the work. Disasters expose everyone involved to traumatic, distressing sights, sounds and situations. The spectacle of massive death and destruction, the suffering of survivors, and the intense pressure surrounding the rescue effort takes its toll.

Experienced humanitarian workers offer the following suggestions to ease passage through the assignment experience.

Brief Yourself

- ask for information on the situation and what is most difficult, dangerous and disturbing about the work and living conditions
- determine the amount of self sufficiency necessary so you can obtain equipment and supplies to maintain yourself
- find an experienced mentor for the settling in period
- obtain a country and location-specific-security briefing

Use Reliable Strategies to Cope in Difficult Circumstances

- compartmentalize; focus on the task at hand
- adopt a small tasks, small goals “one day (or hour) at a time” approach
- monitor inner “self talk”, avoid negative comments to yourself, use self encouragement
- work in pairs with a “buddy agreement” to keep an eye on each other
- adhere to regular shifts and breaks for water, food and rest
- know your personal signs of stress and exhaustion
- agree to periodic leave away from work site

Remember Stress Survival Skills

- use portable forms of exercise, i.e. calisthenics, jump rope
- practice simple relaxation techniques; deep breathing, stretching
- pay attention to nutrition; take care with alcohol, caffeine, sugar
- get sufficient sleep to avoid overdraft in your “sleep bank account”
- develop and use a repertoire of comforting time-out activities that change your focus (books, music, games)

Recognize Critical Events

Sudden, violent occurrences that present a threat to personal safety and assault one’s sense of security and predictability in life are sometimes called *Critical Events*.

Examples include:

- witnessing the death or serious injury of another human being
- involvement in actual or potentially life threatening situation
- injury or death of a co-worker in the line of duty
- dealing with serious injuries and/or deaths of children
- exposure to mass casualties
- involvement with any event described as an atrocity

Such events cause stress reactions which are less disturbing with the knowledge that they are normal responses to an abnormal event. If your work involves possible exposure to critical events, you may find it helpful to be aware of what you or others might experience in the period following the event

⁴ Community and Family Services International (CFSI), Manila, Philippines, 1999

What you may experience:

- a periodic feeling of unreality, events seeming dream-like
- heightened response to loud noises, reminders of the event scene, or any other surprise
- discomfort at being alone
- discomfort being in a group
- difficulty concentrating on what to do next
- difficulty making decisions and thinking creatively
- difficulty relating to those who were not part of the event
- difficulty resting and sleeping, fear of nightmares
- increase or decrease in appetite
- discomfort being in places that seem unsafe to you
- feeling vulnerable, afraid of losing control
- feeling frightened, sad, angry, irritable, confused
- feeling and being exhausted

Manage Critical Event Stress

If you have been busy performing necessary tasks after the event, you may not react until you have less to do. A delayed reaction is common, but puts you on a different timetable from others. The suggestions below may be of help.

Care for yourself

- Take care of yourself. Try to eat regular, easy to digest meals. Avoid sugar and caffeine when mood swings are a problem. Monitor alcohol use.
- Re-establish exercise routine. Even a twenty minute walk will burn off some of the chemical byproducts of intense stress, which remain in your body and contribute to fatigue and tension.
- Rest by choosing from your repertoire of soothing, distracting activities
- Communicate about your experience in ways that feel comfortable. Writing an account of what happened and your reactions to it can be helpful.
- Do what you need to do to feel safe. Review security with a qualified colleague.
- Respect your feelings and ways of handling things and those of others. People cope differently.
- Check out how you are doing with a trusted person. Feedback as you begin to feel more like yourself can be helpful.
- Take part in available debriefing and other recovery activities.
- Reconnect with sources of social and spiritual support.

Care for another exposed to a critical event

Use a common sense approach sometimes known as “Psychological First Aid”, to support the person’s coping and return of control in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic experience.

- Explain your position and role to the person you are supporting
- Obtain medical attention if needed
- Provide a sheltered opportunity for:
 - Food
 - Bathing
 - Resting
 - Communication with family/friends
- Provide protection from additional trauma of:
 - Intrusive questioning
 - unwanted exposure to the public
 - Media attention
- Ascertain the person’s needs for
 - Company/companionship
 - Privacy
- Listen empathetically to what the person wants to tell you about the event

- Validate feelings and reactions (refer to *What You May Experience* above)
- Answer questions honestly
- Encourage re-establishment of personal routines
- Validate use of person's stress management repertoire
- Encourage one day at a time, small tasks, small goals approach

Reflect On Your Experience and Move On

Intense assignments are rarely “over” on departure from the site. In the aftermath some people experience an elevated mood that lasts for days or weeks. Others find the let-down sudden and may go through a grieving process and feel depressed. For some, flashbacks and intrusive images of disturbing events bring anxiety and continued stress, making it hard to let go and move on to new activities. People may dwell on their performance, wishing they had been more effective. They may want to share what happened with those close to them or may find this painful. If after a few weeks discomfort persists, and you are still not able to return to your normal routine obtain a referral for assistance from UNHCR's Staff Welfare Unit. (See *Mobilising Special Support* page 27).

Many find that once the assignment is over, life gradually becomes normal and with normality comes a sense of new beginning born of having survived a challenging and dangerous experience. These people may be aware of new skills and competence acquired in coping with the disaster situation and feel satisfaction about this.

Most people eventually accept the notion that such powerful experiences have positive as well as negative aspects and that memories of these become part of one's life. They become accustomed to reactions surfacing from time to time in response to subsequent disturbing occurrences or on the anniversary of the disaster event. They accept what happened and their role in it, but focus on the future. They move on.