



advice support training

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## **Managing Stress in Humanitarian Work:**

### **A Systems Approach to Risk Reduction**

highlighting the benefits of a systematic program of  
risk reduction for humanitarian organisations

**Purpose:** This booklet describes the impact of stress on humanitarian workers and organizations and sets out strategies to reduce adverse consequences.

**Benefits:** Evidence from various work settings highlights the benefits of a systematic program of risk reduction for the humanitarian community.

## An Overview

### Stress: The risk to humanitarian workers

- Humanitarian work is intrinsically stressful
- Stress comes both from the demands of humanitarian work itself and from poor organizational policies and practices

### The toll of stress on humanitarian workers

- Acute and/or chronic stress causes distress to the individual humanitarian worker
- Workers are more likely to have accidents or become ill
- Emotional exhaustion and burnout are associated with declines in problem solving ability, job performance and productivity.

### Costs to the agency

- Stress and burnout adversely affect the ability of the worker and the agency to actually do their work
- Stress reduces worker satisfaction and commitment to the agency, resulting in increased turnover
- It leads to a higher rate of accidents, more safety and security violations, and increased absenteeism and health care costs.

### Strategies for risk reduction: a systems approach

- Anticipate the sources and intensity of stress
- Help individuals to be more resilient in the face of stress
- Improve team capacity to cope with stress
- Leadership, social support and management practices are amongst the most cost-effective interventions

## **Stress: the Risk to Humanitarian Workers**

**Humanitarian aid work is intrinsically stressful.** Staff often live and work in physically demanding and/or unpleasant conditions. They experience heavy workloads, long hours and chronic fatigue, and lack of privacy and personal space. They are often separated from their family for extended periods. They may complain of inadequate time, inadequate resources, and lack of support to do the job asked of them. They may experience conflict with local authorities and moral anguish over the choices they often have to make. They may face chronic danger or may be repeatedly exposed to tales of traumatization and personal tragedy or to gruesome scenes and they may, themselves, have horrific experiences.

Although many of the stresses facing humanitarian workers are due to the intrinsic nature of humanitarian work itself, humanitarian workers often report that the greatest amount of stress comes from poorly designed organizational policies and practices. Excessive bureaucratic demands or unclear work roles, unsupportive management or poor leadership practices, conflictual relationships within work teams, created or intensified by prolonged close proximity and intimate interdependence, may be potent sources of distress.

National staff may also experience additional sources of stress. Often they or their family have directly experienced the traumatic events that led to the need for humanitarian intervention in the first place. They may live in a community that is still experiencing the on-going effects of these events, compounded with economic hardships. Compared to international staff, they experience higher levels of job insecurity, inequality with respect to pay, benefits, job security, career opportunities, and potentially unequal treatment in event of evacuation or program termination. Cross-cultural misunderstandings exacerbated by racial, ethnic or neo-colonialist issues add to their stress.

## The Toll Of Stress On Humanitarian Workers

Stress can, of course, be a source of growth and many humanitarian aid workers withstand the rigors of their work without adverse effects. However both anecdotal reports and empirical studies have documented the negative consequences of humanitarian work.

In one study approximately 10% of recently returned international aid workers employed by faith-based agencies could be diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and an additional 19% reported clinically significant PTSD symptoms<sup>1</sup>.

Almost 50% of another group of returned international staff were described as being at moderate or high risk of burnout; 15% showed a clinically significant level of symptoms of depression; and 46% showed a high or moderate level of symptoms of PTSD<sup>2</sup>.

In another study, national staff members who had worked in Kosovo showed high levels of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, and alcohol use<sup>3</sup>.

The adverse effects are to be found in many forms, including:

- Post-traumatic stress syndromes, resulting from direct exposure to or witnessing traumatizing experiences
- Secondary traumatization, resulting from repeated exposure to stories and witnessing the suffering of people directly affected by trauma
- Self-destructive behaviors, such as excessive drinking or dangerous driving
- Depression and anxiety
- Grief
- 'Burnout'

## Costs To The Agency

The consequences of stress on the part of humanitarian workers go far beyond the distress experienced by the individuals themselves. Stress may adversely affect the capacity of the agency to provide services to those directly impacted by a disaster or other humanitarian emergency.

Evidence from other work settings (including not-for-profit service sectors and commercial sectors), shows that, regardless of workplace, chronic stress and burnout have significantly negative impacts on the ability of the agency to achieve its goals.

Findings include:

- Chronic stress and burnout are directly associated with **decreased efficiency and effectiveness** in carrying out assigned tasks.
- Workers suffering from chronic stress and burnout have **higher accident rates and higher rates of illness**.
- Workers suffering from chronic stress and burnout have **less commitment to their employing agency and show higher rates of turnover**

A Humanitarian Practice Network survey of 7 NGOs found that for a significant number of staff, stress influenced their decision to leave the agency. Poor leadership, lack of career opportunities, burnout, disillusionment, frustration, bureaucracy and poor functioning were among the factors cited<sup>4</sup>.

## **A Systems Approach to Risk Reduction**

It would be easy to conclude that, although humanitarian aid worker stress is unfortunate, it is inevitable. As the saying goes, “If you can’t take the heat, get out of the kitchen.”

**However, a systematic program of risk reduction, operating at the level of the individual staff member, the team, and the agency as a whole, can significantly reduce the adverse burden of stress.**

Basic strategies for reducing stress include:

- Anticipating and reducing the number and intensity of stressors
- Lessening the impact of stress on the individuals or teams affected
- Improving the ability of individuals and teams to cope with stress
- Intervening to reduce long term consequences of stress

Focusing on the individual worker, agencies can provide workers with training in stress management before deployment. Field managers can encourage their staff to engage in “stress-sensible” practices and can monitor the stress experienced by the staff they supervise and provide assistance for staff experiencing adverse effects of stress. Agencies can arrange for direct support

services for individual staff members who are experiencing adverse effects from stress (especially in the wake of severe or “critical incident” stress). Finally, staff can be debriefed at the end of an assignment (or periodically) with respect to their experience of stress and those who are still experiencing adverse effects of stress several months after the end of their assignment can be guided to follow-up services.

Stress reduction cannot be left to individuals, alone. The most cost-effective ways of reducing the burden of stress on the agency come from actions taken at the team and agency level. Even after highly traumatic experiences, personal capacities and activities account for much less of the psychological outcome than factors within the control of the organization, such as leadership and social (team) support.

The agency itself plays a major role in determining the levels of stress experienced by staff members. Poor management practices, unnecessary bureaucracy, and frictions within the work team may be the greatest sources of stress for humanitarian workers. Other agency policies and practices can also create stress and may also hinder staff members in their individual efforts to deal with stress. Conversely, agency policies and practices can help reduce staff stress and support staff members in their own efforts to manage stress. Good leadership and managerial competence are also critical. Studies in a variety of settings have found that a

“consultative” leadership style can play a major role in increasing staff resilience in the face of stress.

Social support – specifically team cohesion -- is the single most important source of protection for individuals against stress. Even in the extreme context of war, one study found that social support (e.g., platoon cohesion) accounted for 33% of the variability in whether or not a Vietnam veteran developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, while each soldier’s level of exposure to horrific events accounted for only 15-20%.

While an individual humanitarian worker may (and should) have many sources of social support, including family, friends, professional associations, church groups, and community or recreational organizations, his or her work team is of special importance. The members of the work team share a common goal, work and often live in close proximity to each other, and share hardships, dangers, successes and failures. At its worst, when there is serious conflict within the team, the team itself can be a major source of stress. At its best, the team provides an enormously powerful level of protection against the stresses of humanitarian work.

## Final Comments And Resources

Humanitarian aid agencies have a dual responsibility: They must effectively carry out their primary mission and, at the same time, they must protect the well being of their own employees. These responsibilities are not in conflict with one another. From a purely utilitarian perspective, staff stress and burnout have an adverse impact on the ability of the humanitarian aid agency to provide services to the recipients of its work.

The humanitarian community has increasingly realized that programs to reduce the risk of adverse responses to stress are both appropriate extensions of the humanitarian agencies mission to its own workers and make good business sense. This is reflected in the Antares Foundation’s *Guidelines for Good Practice: Managing Stress in Humanitarian Workers* and in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) *Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings*.

A full list of resources is available on the Antares Foundation website ([www.antaressfoundation.org](http://www.antaressfoundation.org)) and on .Antares Australia ([www.antaressfoundation.org.au](http://www.antaressfoundation.org.au)).

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## References

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