

# STRESS

All humanitarian work involves some degree of stress. In development and crisis response work, staff members are confronted with political, cultural and societal issues that cause stress to themselves and their families. Additionally, international staff may need to adapt to a different culture and language. The presence of stress is to be expected and may even be desirable to challenge and focus staff efforts. However, the work environment should be monitored to prevent intolerable stress build-up, which can quickly degrade the health and safety of personnel and effectiveness of programming or intervention.

Exposure to stress produces physiologic changes within the body that enable a proper and effective response. When the body is compelled to react to stressful environmental changes constantly and over a long period of time it can result in physical and/or mental fatigue or mental health problems. Unless properly managed, the tension and pressures will adversely affect staff health and hinder performance and judgement. This chapter provides information on:

## **Identifying Sources of Stress**

### **Stress Indicators**

### **Stress Prevention and Mitigation**

## 7.1 SOURCES OF STRESS

Extreme levels of stress can result from both crisis events and the day-to-day operations of a field office.

### STRESS COMMON TO ALL AID ACTIVITIES

National and international staff may experience day-to-day operational stress from the normal conduct of their work. Factors leading to high stress levels include:

**Personal comfort.** International staff may find their personal physical surroundings unfamiliar or difficult, lacking amenities such as consumer goods, favorite foods, etc. Housing may be communal, and workers may be restricted in the amount and type of personal belongings they are allowed to bring to their assignment.

**Personal safety and security.** High crime levels, instability or insurrection, and other civil disturbances may cause anxiety for aid workers. This is particularly true when the expatriate community is specifically targeted.

**Restrictions on movement.** Restrictions on where a worker may go, such as having borders closed or personnel confined to a compound during off duty hours, can add to overall stress. When recreation areas are placed “off limits” it degrades possible stress coping mechanisms as well.

**Frustration.** All aid workers may experience a high degree of frustration at the project or work site, especially during emergency response. Power outages, shortages of equipment and food, etc. can cause workers to feel that they are not able to accomplish all that they could if more was available.

**Group identification.** An aid worker may come to closely identify with an affected group or vulnerable population. In complex crisis where atrocities are committed on a specific population there may be feelings of revenge or redress. These emotional states can have an effect on a workers mental health and the way in which they respond to a particular group.

**Guilt.** Aid workers, especially international staff, may experience a sense of guilt at “having so much.”

**Isolation.** Workers often feel a sense of loneliness due to their location and the type of work they perform.

### STRESS SPECIFIC TO CRISIS RESPONSE (NATURAL DISASTERS AND COMPLEX EMERGENCIES)

There may be additional stressors during crisis response. National staff may have lost friends or family members or be directly affected by trauma and destruction of property. During refugee crisis, aid organizations often take on staff from the pool of displaced people. Additionally, all may experience increased stress and frustration due to:

**Physical and mental exhaustion.** Disaster workers tend to want to get it all done at once and push themselves very hard. This may cause them to become physically ill or exhibit signs of excess stress, such as becoming irritable, irrational, inappropriately angry, etc.

**Feeling indispensable.** The “Superman Syndrome” leaves aid workers feeling that no one else can perform their tasks and that they cannot leave their post for “one minute.”

**Shock.** An emergency involving loss of human life is so out of context from the worker’s normal surroundings that it may cause emotional shock.

**Media.** The media may be perceived as taking valuable time away from assisting victims. There also can be a sense of anger over what is seen as the media’s focus on the sensational or dramatic.

**Despair/Hopelessness.** Workers may be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the situation.

## 7.2 STRESS INDICATORS

During sustained prolonged exposure to unmanaged stress staff members may exhibit one or more of the following indicators:

- Apathy
- Depression
- Sleeplessness
- Compulsive eating
- Recurrent minor illnesses
- Disharmony with colleagues
- Decline in efficiency and productivity
- Excessive use of alcohol or other substances

### DELAYED REACTIONS TO STRESS

Delayed reaction to stress, often called post-traumatic stress disorder, can occur well after the source of stress is removed. The international staff member evacuated from a conflict area or the Country Office worker that put in long weeks assisting during a natural disaster may find that their experiences are hard to leave behind. The symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder can include:

- *Re-experiencing the trauma through nightmares and intrusive memories.*
- *Feelings of avoidance or numbing, which can include memory loss, guilt, or lack of energy.*
- *Heightened arousal, indicated by nervousness, difficulty concentrating, excessive fear, or sleep disorders.*
- *Manic euphoria or intense mood swings.*

### 7.3 STRESS PREVENTION AND MITIGATION

Through preventive techniques a staff person can work in arduous circumstances while experiencing relatively low levels of stress. The following techniques can minimize stressors and improve the staff member's ability to withstand stress.

**Preparation.** Each person should be properly briefed prior to assignment. Staff posted outside their home country should receive briefings before leaving and additional orientation upon arrival. Individuals should make every effort to learn about the situation in their area of operations to better prepare for possible sources of stress.

**Belief systems.** Staff should be encouraged to maintain their spiritual health consistent with their personal beliefs.

**Maintain good physical health.** Establish a regular exercise program and stick to it. Ensure that everyone is made aware of health risks in the area and how to protect against them.

**Express emotions.** Staff should be encouraged to express emotions appropriately. Fear is a natural response to danger and sharing feelings with colleagues can be an important support element during times of stress.

**Maintain a sense of humor and perspective.** Try to have contact with others outside of the work environment.

**Stay informed.** Personal knowledge of the environment provides an effective way of checking rumors and immediately addressing concerns.

**Rest and relaxation.** Rest often and try to maintain as much as possible normal routines for relaxation, such as hobbies, reading, etc.

### STAFF-LEVEL STRESS PREVENTION

Field management can help prevent stress build-up in their staff through:

**Providing orientation.** *The Country Office should provide cultural, health and safety information prior to and upon arrival of new staff. In areas of insecurity, conduct staff safety and security briefings as often as required to allow staff members to express safety and security concerns or ideas.*

**Encouraging regular time off for all staff.** *In disaster response it is common for staff to attempt to work all day every day, which can quickly lead to burnout. Regular rotation of staff out of the area every three to four weeks can help prevent build-up of excess stress.*

**Expressing appreciation on a regular basis for the individual efforts of staff members.**

**Debriefing.** *Provide a forum for debriefing staff leaving the area, either mandatory or voluntary. For evacuated staff, the debriefing might take the form of critical incident stress debriefing. For others, it may be appropriate to provide a less formal session allowing the staff to express their anxieties and emotions and informing them of where to go for further counseling if necessary.*

### CULTURE SHOCK

Individuals moving into an unfamiliar culture or setting, even within their own national boundaries, may experience the phenomenon known as culture shock. It involves a predictable sequence of emotional responses that many, though not all, people transition through as they enter and adjust to their new surroundings. For aid workers, recognizing the effects of these transition states on overall stress levels is important, especially since there are measures that can be taken to minimize the negative effects.

#### **Stages of Adjustment (Culture Shock)**

*Enthusiasm & Excitement*

*Withdrawal & Loneliness*

*Re-emergence & Adjustment*

*Achievement & Enthusiasm*

*Return Anxiety*

*Shock/Reintegration into Parent Culture*

#### **Tips to Minimize the Consequences of Culture Shock:**

- Recognize that it is normal to feel overwhelmed and out of place at first.
- Try to construct realistic expectations in the beginning.
- Remember that you have survived major transitions before.
- Take care of yourself: get plenty of rest, maintain proper nutrition, stay fit, and limit intake of alcohol.
- Find a mentor or host country national staff member who can answer questions.
- Don't withdraw from social contact with others.
- Keep in touch with family and friends "back home."
- Reach out beyond the expatriate community and beware of reinforcing negative stereotypes of the host country's people.
- When taking time off do something not related to work.