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# Caring for Your Own Emotional Well-being

*Guidelines for Relief Workers*

WHO Project: ICP EHA 011 XD 04



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Workers participating in rescue and relief work after a disaster are exposed to traumatic stress which may affect their own emotional well-being. It has been observed and documented that relief workers develop stress-related problems during relief work and even after relief work is over.*

*Supervisors must make sure that field workers are promptly briefed about what to expect where they are going. Many community level workers will never have seen mutilated bodies or misery in such a large scale as in disasters. They must be properly counseled on these matters before they start their work.*

You have been (will be) doing a very noble job by providing relief services to the disaster affected communities. You might be working overtime, over exerting yourself, witnessing the plight and trauma of the people very closely and frequently realizing your limitations in helping them. These are likely to put you under severe stress and lead to what is often called "burnout". It is your responsibility to manage this stress and control its untoward effect on your emotional well-being and psycho-physical functioning. This is important not only for your own well-being but it can also affect your ability to serve disaster-affected people. This module provides information about the possible factors causing stress to relief workers and also provides guidelines to ensure your emotional well-being.

Before venturing out into the community make sure you are properly prepared in terms of living arrangements, food arrangements and communication needs. It is very important to keep in touch with your family and friends.

## 2. STRESS IN RELIEF WORKERS: WHY DOES IT OCCUR?

You are constantly exposed to stress during relief work due to the following reasons:

- You are repeatedly exposed to grim experiences such as handling bodies, dealing with multiple casualties, powerful emotions and tormenting stories of people affected.

- You frequently carry out physically difficult, exhausting, or dangerous tasks.
- You are exposed to unusual personal demands to help meet the needs of survivors.
- Frequently, you put your own physical and emotional needs at low priority to ensure maximum service to disaster-affected people.
- You neglect your sleep, food, and at times, even personal hygiene in your excessive concern for survivors.
- At times you perceive that you are not able to do enough good to the people and therefore you feel frustrated and helpless.
- At times you feel guilty that you have better access to food, shelter, and other resources than the survivors.
- Frequently, you face moral and ethical dilemmas.
- You are exposed to the anger and apparent lack of gratitude of some affected people
- You may be away from your home and family which deprives you of a very effective psychosocial support system.
- You may feel frustrated by the policies and decisions of your superiors.

### **3. WARNING SIGNS OF UNMANAGEABLE STRESS**

You should be aware of some warning signs of unmanageable stress either in yourself or in your colleagues.

- Mental confusion, inability to make judgments and decisions, inability to concentrate and to prioritize tasks
- Inability to express verbally or in writing
- Anxiety, irritability, depression, excessive rage reactions
- Neglecting one's own safety and physical needs
- Sleep difficulties

- Appetite disturbances
- Excessive tiredness
- Progressive decline in efficiency
- Loss of spirit
- Self-blame
- Decreased self-esteem
- Heroic but reckless behaviour
- Grandiose beliefs about self importance
- Increased stress within relationships
- Mistrusting colleagues and supervisors
- Excessive use of alcohol, tobacco or drugs
- Feeling unappreciated or betrayed by the organization/ agencies one is working with

## **4. WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOURSELF**

### **4.1 Self-help tips to reduce stress during relief work**

- Try not to be emotionally involved, i.e. transfer the grief of others on to yourself. Be very kind and humane but a little detached.
- Be proud of yourself for volunteering your services. Realise that your work is very important even if at times people do not appreciate this.
- Remember that your reactions are normal and unavoidable.
- Be aware of your tension and consciously try to relax. You may also do deep breathing exercises for 10 to 15 minutes once or twice a day.
- Try to find time to do something you enjoy. e.g. listen to music, read a book, go for a jog etc.
- If you cannot sleep or feel too anxious, discuss this with someone you can trust. Don't take sleeping pills, or alcohol and other drugs.

- Talk to someone with whom you feel at ease; describe to him/her what you were thinking or feeling during the critical event.
- Listen to what people close to you say and think about the event. It has affected them too, and they may share insights that will benefit you.
- Continue to work on routine tasks if it is difficult to concentrate on demanding duties. Ask your colleagues/supervisor to reschedule your duties.
- Tell your peers and team leader/supervisor about how the distressing event has affected you, so that they can understand.
- Avoid inflated or perfectionist expectations, either about yourself or others, lest you feel frustrated.
- Participate in group exercises like debriefing and defusing.
- After a few weeks if you still feel uneasy about your reactions, you should seek professional advice.
- Do not self-medicate in any circumstance.
- If at all possible communicate with your family on a daily basis.

## **4.2 Self-help groups for managing stress**

Relief workers should form strong bonds with their own colleagues and openly discuss the nature of their work and the possibility that it can be stressful. Small groups should be formed and the possibility of any of them getting "burnout" should be openly discussed. These discussions should start even before there is evidence of the workers being affected by stress. The group must realize that each person can have a different response to the stressful situation. Nobody should be termed as "weak" or "chastised" for "breaking down".

These groups can have three kinds of sessions to provide psychosocial support to members.

- (1) Informal interaction and socialization during and after work.
- (2) Formal sessions held periodically to discuss the work plan and other activities.

- (3) Specific group exercises aimed to work through the stressful experiences of the relief worker. The most commonly used exercise is "debriefing".

## **Debriefing**

Debriefing is a process of semi-structured group discussion which involves going through, in detail, the sequence of events as experienced by each participant (relief worker). The discussion focuses on the cognitive and emotional reactions of relief workers who are trying to cope with the distressing situations that accumulate from their work experiences. The debriefing is carried out as follows.

- It is done in small groups (8-10) of relief workers working from the same agency / organization.
- The supervisor or the senior-most worker acts as the formal leader of the debriefing group.
- Usually, the debriefing exercise is done in a supportive and confiding environment.
- Usually, the debriefing should be carried out every evening.
- Each debriefing session usually lasts for about 2 hours.
- In the beginning, each worker gives factual information on the day's activities.
- This should be followed by a detailed description of the professional activities carried out by each relief worker.
- Workers should share the emotional and psychological reactions experienced by them while performing these activities.
- Both negative and positive experiences should be shared. The group leader as well as relief workers should encourage the expression of these experiences.
- The group should be able to highlight the normality and similarity (universality) of experiences of all the relief workers and the range of coping methods used by them.

- The group leader (and other participants) should appreciate the relief workers for their successful coping and the positive gains during relief work.
- Groups should advise and support relief worker(s) who have shared their difficulties in coping well in the field.

The group leader should be able to identify any relief worker in need of more specific and individual attention and help.

## 5. OTHER SUPPORTIVE MEASURES FOR EMOTIONAL CARE OF RELIEF WORKERS

Some of the measures which a distressed relief worker may need at an individual level for his emotional care are as follows:

- (1) **Defusing intervention:** A supervisor or a senior relief worker can help a colleague to express his thoughts and feelings about a task at hand.
- (2) **Consultation:** A relief worker should approach his supervisor/ leader or a mental health professional, if available, to seek consultation (advice, guidance, treatment, whatever may apply) if he is unable to cope effectively with his stressful experiences.
- (3) **Crisis Intervention:** This may be required in rare instances where a relief worker is in a crisis situation due to any reasons – personal, familial or fieldwork related. The supervisor or the group leader has the responsibility for providing appropriate crisis intervention services in these cases.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Stress among relief workers is an important issue and should be addressed directly. Accepting the fact that it may occur, openly discussing it and supporting those who may be affected is crucial to the well-being of relief workers. It is the responsibility of the relief worker themselves, the supervisors and the organization for which they work to take care of the well-being of all workers.