



Myndigheten för  
samhällsskydd  
och beredskap

# Coping with stress and crises during missions



## **Coping with stress and crises during missions**

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Stress affects decision-making, judgement, performance and the ability to cooperate. As field staff on international missions, you will encounter difficulties that can cause severe stress. Stress affects your health by directly affecting your body and by weakening your immune system, which makes you more susceptible to illness. Research and experience have shown that it is important to deal with stress and crisis reactions to prevent ill health.

*This pamphlet aims to inform you about how you can cope with stress when on mission and what to do in situations that result in crisis reactions. At the end, you find a self-test and some breathing exercises for relaxation.*



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# What is stress?

We tend to think of stress as a negative state that relates to excessive pressures. In fact, stress is the body's normal reaction to an abnormal situation where the person is called to respond to emotional and physical changes or challenges. Originally, stress was the body's way of coping with threats to survival, situations where fight or flight was required. Stress activates and mobilizes a person's internal resources to react adequately to any situation that is perceived as threatening. However, prolonged stress will deplete your body's resources and may lead to negative stress reactions or distress. It is extremely strenuous for the body to keep getting life threatening signals.



# Sources of stress

The causes of stress are called stressors. Below are examples of some commonly reported stressors you could experience in the field:

## **Environmental/ situational factors**

- Climate – High or low temperatures, extreme humidity
- Insecurity – Armed conflict, criminality
- Surrounded by misery, suffering, violence and poverty
- Unfamiliar culture and language difficulties
- Health risks – Lack of medical care, poor hygiene conditions
- Difficult living conditions

## **Organizational factors**

- Unclear roles and objectives
- Bureaucracy and inadequate leadership
- Lack of resources
- Hostile or ineffective workplace culture
- Secondment – Alienation and loneliness

## **Job related factors**

- Heavy work load
- Inactivity – Waiting for decisions or material, not enough tasks
- Job insecurity, contract based employment
- Conflict with co-workers and/or managers



## **Social and intrapersonal factors**

- Own demands on performance. Fear of not being good enough
- Unrealistic expectations
- Home situation – Limited communication with family
- One's own psychological history and previous experiences

## **Moral challenges and dilemmas**

- Unmet needs of beneficiaries
- Ambiguous situations and motivations
- Questions ones mission
- Diversions of aid
- Prioritization and selection of beneficiaries



# Types of stress

## Basic or day-to-day stress

Dealing with daily routines at home and at work produces an underlying stress. Various stress factors on personal, family, work or social level can cause basic stress. This type of stress can increase when changes occur in the everyday environment. Day-to-day stress tends to be higher for field staff upon arrival in a new mission, as one attempts to manage competing demands of personal maintenance, transport, keeping contact with family, acclimatize in the new culture, etc. Normally the stress is decreasing a few weeks after the arrival in the mission, as field staff manage to establish routines and the situation becomes familiar.

## Critical incident or acute stress

A traumatic event is typically sudden and unexpected. It involves an immediate threat to life that often results in a disrupted sense of control, disrupted beliefs, values and basic assumptions about the world in which we live, the people in it, and the work that we do.

Examples of serious events:

- Witnessing violence, epidemics, disasters, famine
- Being the victim of violence or the threat of violence
- Witnessing bombings and/or large-scale destruction
- Being involved in accidents and serious emergencies



Be mindful, if you don't get help to work through the acute stress reactions there is a risk of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which requires specialist treatment.

## **Moral stress**

Moral stress occurs when you know the right thing to do, but institutional or organizational constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action. Such constraints can lead to you feeling disillusioned and demotivated resulting in burnout.

## **Cumulative stress**

This type of stress is produced by the prolonged exposure to environmental, organizational, job-related, personal and moral stressors. Cumulative stress is the most frequent form of stress in the field and it builds up, often unrecognized, over time.

It can lead to feeling physically and mentally unhealthy when it occurs too often, lasts too long and is too severe. If unmanaged it affects the effectiveness of both the worker and the project. Under normal circumstances, it can adequately be managed through common stress management strategies such as rest, exercise, leisure activities, etc. However, unmanaged and undealt cumulative stress can develop into 'burnout'.

It is worth mentioning that what one person perceives as a stressful situation, another might not. One's individual interpretation of the circumstances, can affect the degree of distress one might experience.

# Recognize signs of distress

The most common signs of cumulative stress include

Recognize signs of distress	
Physical Reactions:	Exhaustion
	Headaches
	High blood pressure
	Insomnia
	Dreams
	Back pain and other chronic tension
	Stomach complaints
Cognitive Reactions:	Tired of thinking
	Obsessive thinking
	Difficulty concentrating
	Forgetfulness
	Problems with decisions/priorities
	Obsessions
	Rigid thinking
Spiritual/Philosophical Reactions:	Cynicism
	Doubt of value system/religious beliefs
	Questioning the major life areas (profession, employment, lifestyle)
	Feeling threatened and victimized
	Disillusionment
	Self-preoccupation

## Recognize signs of distress

### Emotional Reactions:

Anxiety

Feeling alienated

Negativity

Depressed mood

Feeling pressured/overwhelmed

Diminished pleasure

Loss of sense of humor

Crying

Anger and irritability

### Behavioral Reactions:

Anger displacement, blaming others

Poor job performance

Social withdrawal

Changes in eating habits and sexual activities

Unwillingness to take leave

Substance abuse, self-medication

High alcohol consumption

Disregard for security

# Preventing and coping with cumulative stress

## Preventive measures

There is much you can do to make sure you're taking care of yourself, to improve your well-being, and to help alleviate stress reactions. No single technique will relieve all your distress, but paying attention to the following three areas of self-care will build up your resilience.

Good **physical condition** is a good foundation for being able to cope with stress. This is based on:

- A balanced diet
- Good fluid balance
- Regular exercise
- Regular sleeping habits
- Maintaining a good bodily weight
- Limited intake of nicotine, caffeine, alcohol, and other stimulants

One of the best things you can do to avoid burnout is to create balance in your life. Invest more in nourishing the relationship with your family and other personal relationships, social activities and hobbies. Expand your self-image so that your job doesn't have such an overpowering influence on your self-esteem.

As you read the list below with **emotional/relational strategies** for preventing stress, thoughtfully examine your self-care practices.

- Contact with home/friends through email or phone
- Venting with friends and colleagues in the field
- Using humor
- Reflection: journaling, writing, meditating, poetry
- Creative activity such as cooking and/or painting
- Watching movies, reading books, listen to music
- Having balanced priorities
- Having realistic expectations
- Attending counseling sessions

Paying attention to **spiritual self-care** is just as important as the physical and emotional aspects of resilience. It helps you maintain perspective, and guides you when you're feeling overwhelmed. It is almost impossible to do humanitarian work without it affecting your worldview and your sense of what's important in your life.

- Knowing your values: Where do you tend to find meaning in life?
- Participating in a community of meaning and purpose
- Set a side time for reading, meditation and engaging activities
- Engaging in meaningful conversations
- Solitude

## Coping strategies

- **Reflect on your well-being**

It isn't always easy to accept that you are feeling distress and need to do something about it when you're right in the middle of an intensive mission. Make a habit of taking time to reflect on how you feel. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Have you noticed any of these general signs of stress lately?
- What self-care and coping strategies (both negative and positive) are you using to alleviate stress, fatigue, or other symptoms?
- What sustains you in this work (i.e., what refreshes you, energizes you, and gives you hope)?
- What helpful self-care strategies do you wish you were using more regularly?

- **Avoid or remove that which is causing stress**

If possible, avoid that which is stressing you. If this means that you're only postponing the problem then it's better to deal with it. Start by analyzing the problem and breaking it down into smaller goals that are more manageable. Make a list with the goals and prioritize accordingly. Start with the one that you know you will be able to achieve and it doesn't overwhelm you. That way you get a positive reinforcement and that will motivate you to continue.

- **Relaxation**

You can reduce your stress level through various relaxation techniques (see exercises at the end of this pamphlet). Other ways can for example be via meditation, yoga or tai chi.

- **Change the way you think**

We all have a tendency to over-identify with our thoughts, amplifying them in our minds to become “the truth”. When we perceive our thoughts as “facts” or the “truth”, the thoughts themselves can become over-controlling, preventing us from seeing other options. Learning to step back from thoughts:

- looking at thoughts for what they are, just thoughts.
- noticing thoughts rather than getting caught up or buying into the thought
- letting thoughts come and go rather than holding onto the thought

- **Ventilate stress**

Talk with someone about how things are for you. If you like writing you can keep a diary or write letters. You can also do things you like doing and relaxes you. Exercise is another way to ventilate stress.



## **Team managers' role in recognizing and preventing cumulative stress**

Team managers might notice some of the aforementioned signs in an individual team member, or observe some of the following reactions indicative of cumulative stress in their team

- Anger towards managers/co-workers
- Low performance
- Frequent sick leaves
- Lack of initiative
- Clique formation (inner and outer “circle”)
- Conflict within the group
- Negative attitude towards workplace
- Critical attitudes towards colleagues
- Scapegoat mentality

Manager's role in preventing cumulative stress is vital, as they are tasked with maintaining a healthy working environment. It is essential for managers to know that they serve as a role model and exert great influence on their staff members.

Below are some actions that could facilitate prevention of cumulative stress:

- Create opportunities to speak out, express their concerns and objections
- Facilitate recreational activities and social events
- Encourage an open line of communication
- Grant and encourage holidays and RnR
- Avoid working late hours and all days of the week, for instance avoid sending emails late in the evening
- Conduct a stress risk assessment

Staff member and managers alike have shared responsibility to prevent cumulative stress.



# Coping with critical incident or acute stress

## Critical incident stress reactions

After a critical incident, it is normal to experience stress reactions. The reactions can be instantaneous or have a delay onset and it can last from a few minutes to few weeks.

Reactions during the first hours:

- Shock, disbelief, feeling of being overwhelmed
- Strong emotional reaction or detachment
- Confusion, difficulty in making decisions
- Physical reactions: nausea, dizziness, intense fatigue, sleeping difficulties, muscle tremors, etc

Additional reactions during the first days and weeks:

- Persistent, intrusive recollections (flashbacks) of the incident, nightmares
- Tendency to avoid certain aspects of the incident (places, thoughts, emotions, activities)
- Hyper-alertness accompanied by a startle reflex, quick temper and sleeping disturbances

## Various forms of support

People have different levels of resistance and capacities for recovery. However talking is beneficial in various way. It helps to create order in chaotic impressions and thoughts; it facilitates the recovery process and can limit the long-term psychological effects.

- Provide “psychological first aid”

It is extremely important that managers or colleagues offer simple and caring support as soon after the incident as possible.

- Active listening
- Provide factual information and practical support
- Help the person to re-establish his/her daily routine
- Implement the 3L: Look, Listen, Link people to services and networks

- Self-help strategies

After a traumatic event, it is extremely important to take care of yourself in order to minimize the impact of the experience.

- Give words to the experience
- Call, talk or be with someone
- Get information on usual reactions you may be experiencing.
- Use physical exercise, music, rest, breathing and relaxation to reduce tension
- Monitor intake of coffee, alcohol and nicotine
- Keep to a daily routine as much as possible.

- After Action Review (preferably led by managers trained in AAR) is a structured review process for analyzing what happened, why it happened, and how it can be done better next time in order to avoid such critical incidences. Here the focus is on the actual events and to fill information gaps and not as much on processing thoughts and emotions.

Remember that MSB staff counselor is here to support you throughout your mission. Do not hesitate to get in touch.



# Psychological support for MSB field staff

During mission, the staff counselor aims to provide support to each individual field staff who expresses a psychosocial need. If, during your mission you:

- experience long-lasting stress symptoms;
- are facing a challenging situation; or
- you just want to talk to someone outside your mission in a confidential manner

**Do not hesitate to contact the MSB staff counselor:**

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# Annexes

## Self-test

### HOW STRESSED ARE YOU?

Source: Headington Institute

Please note: this scale is not a clinical diagnostic instrument and is provided for educational purposes. It merely identifies some of the more common symptoms of stress. If you have any concerns about your state of emotional health, you should consult with a mental health professional.

### INSTRUCTIONS:

In the last month, how often has the following been true for you? Write the number that fits your reality on the line before each question.

### TOTAL SCORE:

#### INTERPRETATION GUIDELINES

##### **0 – 25:**

A score in this range suggests that you're probably in great stress-shape!

##### **26 – 50:**

A score in this range suggests that you may be experiencing a low to moderate degree of stress.

##### **51 – 75:**

A score in this range suggests you may be experiencing a moderate to high degree of stress.

##### **76 – 100:**

A score in this range suggests that you may be experiencing a very high degree of stress



## 0 | Never 1 | Seldom 2 | Sometimes 3 | Often 4 | Always

- \_\_\_1. I feel tired.
- \_\_\_2. I find it very hard to relax or “wind-down.”
- \_\_\_3. I find it hard to make decisions.
- \_\_\_4. My heart races and I find myself breathing rapidly.
- \_\_\_5. I have trouble thinking clearly.
- \_\_\_6. I eat too much or too little.
- \_\_\_7. I get headaches.
- \_\_\_8. I feel emotionally numb.
- \_\_\_9. I think about my problems over and over again during the day.
- \_\_\_10. I have sleeping problems (e.g., trouble falling asleep, trouble staying asleep, trouble waking up, nightmares, etc).
- \_\_\_11. I have trouble feeling hopeful.
- \_\_\_12. I find myself taking unnecessary risks or engaging in behavior hazardous to health and/or safety.
- \_\_\_13. I have back and neck pain, or other chronic tension-linked pain
- \_\_\_14. I use caffeine or nicotine more than usual.
- \_\_\_15. I feel overwhelmed and helpless.
- \_\_\_16. I have nervous habits (e.g., biting my nails, grinding my teeth, fidgeting, pacing, etc).
- \_\_\_17. I forget little things (e.g. where I put my keys, people’s names, details discussed during the last work meeting).
- \_\_\_18. I have stomach upsets (e.g., nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, gas).
- \_\_\_19. I am irritable and easily annoyed.
- \_\_\_20. I have mood-swings and feel over-emotional.
- \_\_\_21. I find it hard to concentrate.
- \_\_\_22. I have trouble feeling that life is meaningful.
- \_\_\_23. I am withdrawn and feel distant and cut off from other people.
- \_\_\_24. I use alcohol and/or other drugs to try and help cope.
- \_\_\_25. My work performance has declined and I have trouble completing things.

## **Breathing exercises**

### **Basic breathing**

1. Sit or stand in a relaxed position.
2. Slowly inhale through your nose, counting to five in your head.
3. Exhale from your mouth, counting to eight in your head as it leaves your lungs.
4. Repeat several times. That's it!

### **Tips:**

- As you breathe, let your abdomen expand outward, rather than raising your shoulders. This is a more relaxed and natural way to breathe, and helps your lungs fill more fully with fresh air, while releasing more “old” air.
- You can do this just a few times to release tension, or for several minutes as a form of meditation.
- If you like, you can make your throat a little tighter as you exhale so the air comes out like a whisper. This type of breathing is used in some forms of yoga and can add additional tension relief.

### **Breathing and visualization**

- Close your eyes and relax. Let your breathing become slower and deeper.
- Breathe from your diaphragm or belly instead of from your shoulders or chest. Don't force it, but let your breathing become natural and relaxed.

## **Visualize...**

- As you breathe in, imagine that 'relaxation' is coming into your body and flowing through your limbs, reaching every part of you. As you breathe out, imagine that all the stress from your body is being released. After a few minutes, you should feel more 'full' of peace, and the stress in your body should be reduced.

## **Or...**

- As you breathe, imagine that your hands and feet are getting warmer. With practice, this can further reverse your stress response and actually warm your extremities, relaxing your body in the process.

## **Another Idea...**

- Imagine that, with each breath, your body is becoming looser. With each exhalation, your limbs are a little more like spaghetti, your face a little more relaxed, your body a still pool of water.

## **Keep breathing.**

- Continuing this exercise for between five and twenty minutes can relieve stress and help you return to your activities (and stressors) with a renewed sense of strength and serenity.

## **Tips:**

- If you are really tired and fear that this will put you to sleep, keep your practice to about 5 minutes, or set an alarm.
- Conversely, if you're having trouble sleeping, this exercise may prove very helpful.

# Resources

- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. *Managing stress in the field*. 2009 - Fourth edition (First edition 2001)
- McKay L, *Understand and coping with traumatic stress*. Headington Institute.
- *Managing stress of the humanitarian emergencies*. Staff Welfare Section Division of Human Resources Management UNHCR HQ
- International Committee of the Red Cross. *Humanitarian action & armed conflict: Coping with stress*. Geneva 1992

## Notes



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