

IMC Info Sheet

Staff Exposed to Stressful Incidents

Staff working in humanitarian emergencies is frequently exposed to extremely stressful situations such as violence, insecurity, armed conflict, witnessing suffering or even death and at times life threatening situations. Here are a few points that may be helpful:

What do people experience?

Experiencing psychological distress (e.g. fear, anger, nightmares, loss of concentration, irritability, sadness, guilt, trouble sleeping) when something very distressing or frightening happens is considered a normal reaction to an abnormal event. Most people will feel this way, it is important to not pathologize such reactions. Sometimes the stress reactions appear immediately after the event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some very rare cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

Do people need help from a mental health professional?

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the stressful event. With the understanding and the support of loved ones, stress reactions usually pass more quickly and the vast majority of people recover on their own. Occasionally, people continue to experience severe distress over longer periods that makes it difficult to function in their day to day lives (e.g. at work, relationships) and professional assistance from a psychiatrist, psychologist or counselor may be helpful. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular experiences were just too powerful or difficult to manage and it is ok to ask for help.

What can I do to help someone who just experienced a stressful event?

- Social support is important. Most people recover best using their own social support networks (e.g. family, friends) and coping strategies, which can take time.
- Group debriefing sessions (where people are asked to share their experiences in a group) for those who have experienced stressful events (or “critical incidents”) are no longer considered best practice and research suggests that such practices can sometimes do harm.
- People who have experienced a stressful event should have the opportunity to talk about what happened to others who they trust and who will listen, but they should never be forced to talk or share their experiences.
- It is important to let people make their own decisions based on what they think would be best for them. Everyone has their own way of coping (see IMC Handout on “Taking Care of Yourself”). For some people, it is helpful to continue their work and daily routines. Others may want to take time off to be with friends or family.
- At the organizational level, positive coping and seeking help or rest as needed should be supported.

Where can I find more information?

More self-care resources can be found here:

Antares Foundation: <http://www.ataresfoundation.org/guidelines.htm>

Headington Institute: <http://www.headington-institute.org/>

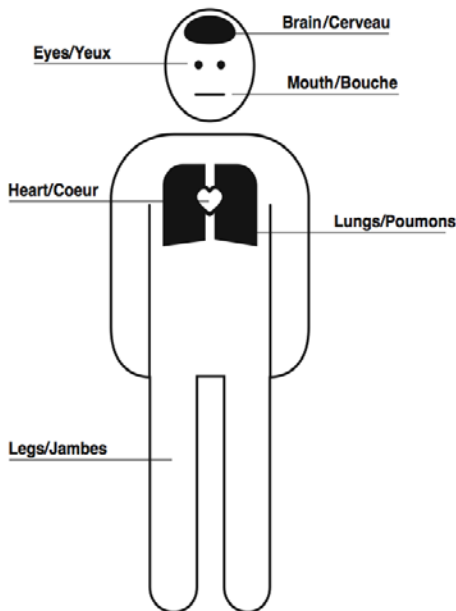
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Normal Reactions to Fear

FEAR is a normal reaction to dangerous situations and emergencies.

When we are facing an emergency, we feel fear. Fear functions as a signal for our brain to produce a natural substance called ADRENALIN. Adrenalin is the signal that will trigger our body to respond and survive.

DANGER → FEAR → BRAIN: ADRENALIN → SURVIVAL



When we are very afraid, we can experience:

- Our hair standing on end
- Our pupils (eyes) dilate
- We sweat to regulate our temperature
- Our mouth is dry
- We breathe faster to get more oxygen
- Our heart beats faster to pump more blood
- All our blood goes to our brain and muscles.

NO DANGER → FEAR → ADRENALIN → ANXIETY

When we continue to feel fear, because we have become more sensitive to noises, tremors and other potential dangers, BUT it is NO LONGER A DANGEROUS SITUATION, we can experience the following:

- Anxiety, tension, trouble sleeping or concentrating
- Flashback of the past danger, nightmares
- Confusion, feelings of guilt, sadness, irritability or anger.

If we BREATHE TOO FAST, we can hyperventilate and feel the following sensations:

- Chest pain, palpitations
- Choking,
- Pins and needles in the hands,
- Dizziness and fainting.

ANXIETY → BREATHING → RELAX

The simplest response to this normal reaction is to NORMALIZE our fear and CONTROL our BREATHING.
Please TRY the following EXERCISE:

1. Put your right hand on your chest
2. Put your left hand on your belly
3. Breathe deeply and slowly with your stomach (pump up your stomach, not your chest)
4. Repeat this for 2 minutes.

Most of your signs of fear should decrease with this exercise. Repeat whenever you feel anxious.

Written by Jean Malpas for International Medical Corps, Haiti, March 2010.



IMC Info Sheet

Taking Care of Yourself

Although some of us will stay for a maximum of 2 weeks and others for a few months, we all share the desire to give the best of our professional and personal skills to this relief effort. Health care and humanitarian workers tend to minimize how they are affected by the work conditions and the difficulties that they witness. We think we must be strong, “hold it together” and cannot afford to rest. If we don’t keep going, who will? These constitute great intentions as well as probably a large part of the drive that pulls us through in a very challenging time.

However “the road to burn out is paved with good intentions”: If we let this noble drive blind us to the reality of our own limits and needs, we accumulate excessive stress without recharging enough. We become overly anxious, burdened and we get sick. Even if the staffing needs are overwhelming, the reality is unfortunately that we cannot do as much as we would like to and that we need to look after ourselves as well.

Here are a couple of things you can do:

KNOW YOUR SIGNS OF EXCESSIVE STRESS

Excessive stress is the reaction to any challenge, demand, threat or change that exceeds our coping resources and results in distress. Stress chemicals can trigger physical reactions that can linger for days, weeks, or sometimes months. In addition to triggering physical reactions, stress hormones and chemicals affect brain chemistry and impact the way we think and feel. Over time, as our bodies, emotions and minds are affected by stress. Please look at the table below and answer the following questions:

- Have you noticed any of these general signs of stress lately?
- When you are under pressure, which of these signs of stress tend to appear first?
- Which is the one that you should NOT ignore?

PHYSICAL	EMOTIONAL	COGNITIVE	BEHAVIORAL
Sleep disturbances	Mood swings	Poor concentration	Risk taking (such as driving recklessly)
Changes in appetite	Feeling “over-emotional”	Confusion and disorganized thoughts	Over-eating or under-eating
Stomach upsets	Irritability	Forgetfulness	Increased smoking
Rapid heart rate	Anger	Difficulty making decisions	Listlessness
Fatigue	Depression	Dreams or nightmares	Hyper-alertness
Muscle tremors and tension	Anxiety	Intrusive thoughts	Aggression and verbal outbursts
Back and neck pain	Emotional numbness	Cynicism	Alcohol and/or drug use
Headaches	Discouragement and loss of hope		Compulsive behavior (i.e. nervous tics and pacing)
Inability to relax and rest	Alienation and loss of sense of connection		Withdrawal/isolation
Being easily startled			Promiscuity

KNOW YOUR STRENGTHS AND LIMITS

The first obvious yet most difficult part of self-care is taking breaks. Please remember to take a couple of breaks during your shift, drink and eat on a regular basis. Sleep is also essential and you will need a minimum of 6 hours of sleep a night.

IMC strongly encourages you to take ½ day breaks every 4 days. Please discuss with your manager (e.g. medical director, volunteer coordinator) taking a half-day break every four days and, if you are staying longer than 2 weeks, at least a full day every week.



USE POSITIVE COPING STRATEGIES

Use positive coping strategies and avoid negative strategies. Here are a few suggestions. Please review them and find out which ones are most helpful to you in general as well as which ones you want to add to your routine:

Positive Coping Strategies	Negative Coping Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular exercise and sports activities Getting enough sleep Healthy eating Drinking water Laughter Relaxation techniques Therapeutic massage Religious activities and practices Talking about experiences and listening/talking with others Reading books or magazines Enjoying time with nature Listening to music Watching movies Reflection: journaling, writing, meditating, poetry Contact with friends and family over email phone or skype Nurturing relationships with the group Having balanced priorities Having realistic expectations Asking for help or seeking counselling support if needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using alcohol or drugs to self-medicate Smoking Sleeping all day Excessive eating (or not eating) Avoiding and detachment from family and friends, social isolation Negative thinking, blaming Avoiding responsibilities Violent behavior, loosing temper Neglect personal hygiene