Coping with stress

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Key points

- Know what you are trying to do in every situation. This helps you to remain constructive when you face problems.

- Engage in something other than work every day. This helps you to stay mentally fit.

- Call or skype home. Write a letter if telephone lines are poor or internet is too slow for skype. This helps you to be who you are.

- Create opportunities for extended sleep (at least 6 hours). Make every effort to eat good food. Drink water rather than alcohol or sweetened soft drinks. This helps you to remain balanced.

- Do not drink excessively to unwind or relax. Practice breathing or other relaxing exercises instead.

1. Overview

Working in humanitarian emergencies is among the hardest of professions. Stressors are pervasive, and how we cope with stress often determines whether the personal outcome is positive or negative. Stress can push us to extraordinary achievements but can also have insidiously debilitating effects on what we do and how we do it. Sometimes, we experience different states simultaneously.

We tend to engage in an emergency operation as if it is a sprint. Rather than pace ourselves, we run as hard and fast as possible. However, emergencies are hardly ever short sprints. To avoid the malign effects of cumulative stress, we need to learn how to pace ourselves and find time for activities other than work. The sections below on ‘good practice recommendations' and 'considerations for practical implementation' may help you to keep chronic fatigue at bay.
An emergency deployment requires the best of us. If we are incapacitated by fatigue or stress, we offer less than we can. To meet the needs of persons of concern, we have a duty to enhance our personal resilience and manage stress as well as possible.

2. Main guidance

Underlying policies, principles and/or standards

‘Resilience’ refers to a person's ability to adapt well to adversity, tragedy, threats, or major sources of stress. It is not a trait that individuals possess or lack; it involves behaviours, attitudes and feelings that we can learn and foster.

Experienced or not, every stressed individual can reach a point of saturation; beyond it, habitual coping mechanisms do not work. For this reason, you should not take your resilience for granted or neglect yourself during emergency deployments. If you notice too late that you are overtired, you may already have harmed yourself, damaged your team’s dynamics or, most important, failed adequately to have assisted persons of concern, who need your contribution the most.

See if you recognize yourself in some of the descriptions below. You may also use a self-assessment tool (see ‘documents and references’).

A. Cumulative stress impairs your capacity to process information. You become less able to manage more than two pieces of information at once, or absorb new information and integrate it with knowledge you already possess. It impairs decision-making and your ability to learn from experience, two faculties of high importance in emergency operations.
B. Cumulative stress reduces your ability to cooperate. Normally most of us have a good balance between our desire to make an impact in the world, and our desire to be liked by and associate with people around us. When we are stressed, power dominates the impulse to affiliate. We focus on getting ahead, careless of whether we are liked or not. Relationships become manipulative, a means to an end.
C. Cumulative stress detaches you from people around you. A stress-induced hormonal misbalance initially causes moodiness, which eventually becomes emotional numbness. Anger becomes the only directly experienced emotion.
D. In the long run, cumulative stress may make you sick, physically and mentally.

Good practice recommendations

Know why you are where you are, in your life and in your day. Know what you expect from what you are doing. This knowledge is the foundation of resilience to stress and fatigue. People who have decided what they want to achieve, and can see the purpose of their actions and experiences, are far less vulnerable to the malignant impacts of stress. Conversely, when we deny or fail to understand our deeper motives, we tend to disengage from work and our environment, making ourselves highly vulnerable to the malignant effects of stress.
Answering the questions below may help you to recognize your motives, particularly if you write the answers down in a personal note. Take time to think about your answers in a quiet environment and have the courage to be honest with yourself.

Note that answers may be complex and are frequently not coherent or consistent. What you write may seem contradictory. Such contradictions pose less of a problem when we are familiar with them.

- Why do you work in UNHCR?
- What did you realistically expect from this particular assignment?
- What did you hope for?
- How does your situation look today, in the light of your answers to these questions?

It is also important to understand how you value yourself and what you do. This knowledge helps you to deal with others who try to assess you, and with any dissatisfaction you may feel because work is not being done properly. Once again, your answers may not be coherent; be honest and consider carefully what you say.

- What are the personal costs, and the rewards, of your work?
- How do you measure success in your work?
- What can you control in your work?
- What did you (or will you) achieve today?

Revisit these questions from time to time. When you are in trouble it may help to remind yourself of the ‘bigger picture’.

Do not assume that you know the answers. Write down what you think and look at what you have said.

You may call a staff welfare officer (see ‘Need help?’) to talk about your answers and your frustrations. Your conversation will be confidential and may deepen your understanding.

**Considerations for practical implementation**

Being as clear as possible with yourself about your motives, about the rewards you obtain from your job, and the price you pay, is the foundation of resilience.

The next step in building and sustaining personal resilience is to make every reasonable effort to eat well, sleep well, and drink enough water. Good health and fitness are prerequisites for coping effectively with stress.

Do not drink too much alcohol to unwind or relax. There are better ways, some of which are proposed below.
Take leave and holidays when you can and make sure that you schedule them.

To help you stay in a healthy state of mind (and eat well, sleep well, and stay away from alcohol, tobacco and other drugs), we propose the following practices.

- Think regularly about things other than work: this injunction is common to all methods of building resilience.
- Avoid talking about work with your colleagues after work. Do not become your work.
- Keep in regular contact with home and friends (by skype or e-mail). They will remind you that there is a world outside your duty station.
- Find an understanding soul in your duty station and talk about what matters (emotions, meaning, life choices).
- Write your thoughts in a stream of consciousness every evening. It has been shown that this technique improves the quality of sleep and reduces the impact of cumulative stress.

**[Instructions]** Set a 15 minute alarm on your phone so that you do not have to watch the time. Have enough paper to hand. Promise yourself you will show no-one what you write. Start writing whatever comes into your mind and keep writing for 15 minutes (until the alarm rings). Do not try to write coherently, correctly, or in complete sentences. When you do not know what to write, write that thought down. Do the exercise regularly, every evening.

- Do a mindfulness breathing exercise every evening. This is an alternative to the stream of consciousness exercise, and also improves the quality of sleep. If practised in the morning, it improves attention, emotional control and mental discipline in general.

**[Instruction]** Set a 15 minute alarm on your phone so that you do not have to watch the time. Sit in a chair with your back straight, your legs parallel to each other, and hands resting in your lap. Take slow deep breaths. Exhale for slightly longer than you inhale. Keep your mind focused on the flow of air and on the movement of your belly. When your thoughts attract your attention, concentrate on breathing ... Breathe 100 times if need be; let the thoughts come and go. Do this exercise regularly every morning. Do not be discouraged if you cannot make two consecutive breaths without chasing your thoughts. Most people find this at the start. This is an exercise in willed focus of mind, very helpful in chaotic environments like those that exist in an emergency.

- Take physical exercise or do yoga. These activities rebalance your hormones and drain toxic metabolic agents.

**[Instructions]** Many sites provide advice. Try: [http://emergencyo.RAPMEWebsite.com/](http://emergencyo.RAPMEWebsite.com/)

- If you have hobbies, practise them: do them every day if the environment permits.
- Read literature rather than watch TV. Television rarely engages your mind as much as
Resources and partnerships

In UNHCR, eight staff counsellors (in Islamabad, Amman, Nairobi, Juba, Kinshasa, Geneva, and Dakar) are available to give personal advice and confidential counselling. (See ‘Need help?’)

The UN has more than 100 staff and stress counsellors. Check if there is one in your duty station.

You may also make use of external professionals.

3. Links

A site dedicated to the mental health of humanitarian workers This covers a broad range of health subjects, including mental health, in a use... A site dedicated to raising self-awareness A site developed by colleagues which demonstrates yoga and other stress managem...

4. Main contacts

UNHCR staff welfare officers:

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