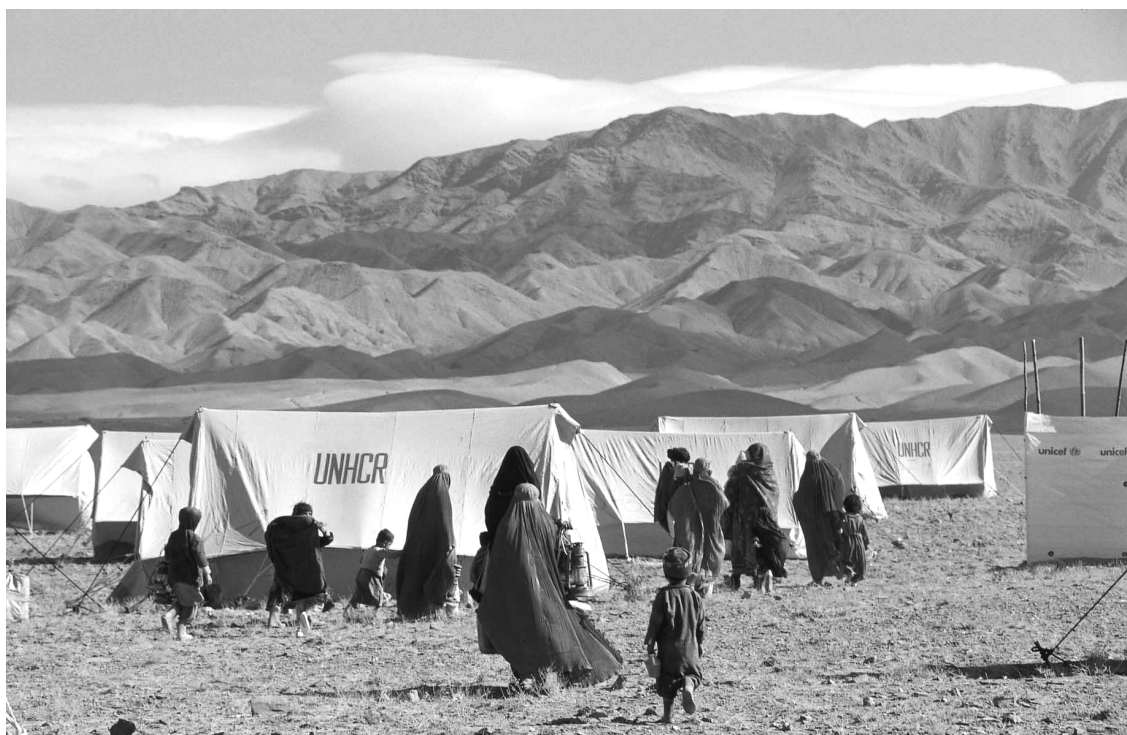


# TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

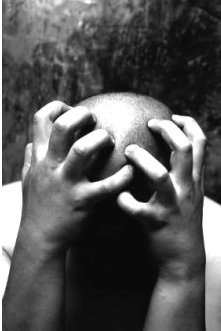
## A Brief guide for UNHCR Fieldworkers

*"I am so excited about my new assignment. I will be assisting refugees and helping to make a real difference in their lives. The hours may be long, the conditions in the camps are difficult, and the stories the refugees have told me so far are horrifying, but I know that I can help."*



People who choose a career in UNHCR are often passionate about their work and derive great personal satisfaction from assisting refugees. While there are many rewards inherent in this type of work, UNHCR staff also experience unique challenges. We are often faced with demanding work loads in less than favourable conditions, are separated from family and loved ones for extended periods of time. We are exposed to stressful and life threatening events, and work very closely with people who have faced significant hardships. All of these experiences can potentially hinder our ability to be productive in and derive enjoyment from our work. The effects of these experiences can also negatively impact our personal lives and our families. Therefore, the importance of self care cannot be overemphasised.

Self care starts with awareness. Our intention is to provide you with information that will allow you to help organize and understand some of the internal motions you may experience with your work, and to emphasize the importance of regular self care to help you continue to enjoy your work and have satisfying interpersonal relationships. If you have any questions about the information presented in this document please do not hesitate to contact a Staff Welfare Officer.



*"I am starting to have a real problem sleeping lately. I lie in bed for hours and I think about all of the terrible stories I have heard from the refugees. I am so tired during the day. I also notice that I get angry with my co-workers very easily, and they have commented several times to me how irritable I am. Sometimes when the refugees tell me their stories I feel like I am not even listening, and I find it hard to care anymore. How can I do my job if I don't care anymore? I am starting to think that the world is a very unsafe place, and I worry about my safety and my family's safety all of the time. What is happening to me?"*

## **Stress**

Everyone has experienced stress at some point in their life, and stress can be considered a "call to action"; you have experienced an event or events that require you to do something, to act in such a way that the threat or situation has been dealt with in a satisfactory way. The event could be sudden, an earthquake or accident, or a situation that builds over time such as listening to people recount traumatic events, but in essence stress is a physiological/psychological response to an event or events that is a signal for us to manage or deal with the event causing the stress. If we can act in such a way as to reduce the threat caused by the event, the stress diminishes and we calm down; and if we don't act in some way to remedy the situation, the stress continues and we continue to experience the psychological and physiological symptoms of stress. The second point is very important in the context of fieldwork because sometimes there are difficult stressful events we face that don't have quick or easy solutions, and these stressful events often build over time.

How we cope with stressful events is very important and often is the difference between positive and negative outcomes. Adaptive coping involves finding ways to calm oneself but in a way that does no harm, for example relaxation, recreation, communication, examining the way we think about events etc., which results in you reducing the physical and psychological sensations associated with stress. Sometimes there are no readily identifiable ways to change a situation (some things you can change, some things you can't) and at these times it is very important to engage in self-care. The more you increase your repertoire of techniques to cope adaptively with stress, the better off you will be, you will enjoy your work more, and your relationships will thrive.

You can contrast adaptive coping with maladaptive coping. Maladaptive coping is using something to reduce the effects of stress that often leads to other problems. For example, drinking alcohol in excessive amounts to reduce the sensations of stress: it may work in the short term as alcohol can have a sedating effect, but over the long term you run the risk of developing alcohol dependency, relationships problems over the use of alcohol will appear, you may have productivity problems at work etc. If not dealt with effectively or in an adaptive manner, prolonged stress can lead to a significant decrease in your quality of life. So, we encourage you to build a repertoire of methods that will help you cope with stress in an adaptive manner.

## **Responses to Stress**

Sudden unexpected events activate the sympathetic nervous system, which results in *the fight or flight response*. This immediate response occurs when we feel threatened. Heart rate increases, respiration increases, and our perception becomes heightened in order to take in as much information as possible. The body is prepared to fight or run away. Once the threat has diminished, the parasympathetic nervous system takes over and we become calm, our heart rate returns to normal and we start to relax. Many of the exercises and strategies presented later in this document are designed to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which results in a state of physical and psychological calm.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is one potential reaction to a stressful event. The development of PTSD involves being exposed to an event where your life was threatened or you witnessed an event where there was loss of life or serious injury. There are three clusters of symptoms associated with PTSD; the first cluster is re-experiencing and the most common symptom are flashbacks (the event replays in your mind like a movie you can't turn off) and physiological arousal (the fight or flight response); the second cluster has to do with avoiding anything that reminds you of the event and the third cluster is arousal; you feel jumpy, you startle easily and you become hypervigilant (you are always on the look out for threat even where there is no obvious threat).

It is important to remember that there are normal responses to traumatic events and that the majority of people who experience a very traumatic event will have some of these symptoms initially, but for the majority of people the symptoms will diminish over time. If these symptoms persist for longer than one month and they seriously impact your ability to work, your relationships or your family life, then contact your staff welfare officer. The longer these symptoms go untreated, the more likely one is to engage in maladaptive coping to ineffectively reduce the impact of the symptoms, and the more likely one is to develop other conditions like depression. There are many good and reliable ways to treat PTSD but the first step is to seek out your staff welfare officer, or your doctor.

Prolonged stress is a little more complicated as there is no easy way to fix the situation that is causing the stress. Prolonged stress can result in many of the same symptoms associated with sudden events, however the onset of the symptoms is more insidious and slow and the symptoms build over time; people may have problems sleeping, they may ruminate or think about events over and over again, they may feel agitated and jumpy, they become short tempered, find it difficult to concentrate, their appetite diminishes, they withdraw etc.

Several terms have been used to describe the effects of prolonged stress, and what follows is a brief description of the terms.

### **Secondary or Vicarious Trauma**

In recent years it has become increasingly recognised that professionals who work with traumatised individuals such as therapists, lawyers, emergency workers or aid workers in the field, can experience a range of symptoms secondary to their exposure to clients' traumatic experiences. Secondary Trauma or Vicarious Trauma is usually associated with cumulative exposure to people recounting traumatic events, which is consistent with field work. Symptoms can include rumination (thinking about the stories you have heard over and over again, similar to flashbacks but not the same intensity), irrational fears regarding safety, depressed mood, poor concentration and memory problems. Vicarious Trauma is in part related to the professionals' empathic engagement with the client while telling their traumatic story. Also, listening to those stories that resonate with you on a personal level are thought to play a crucial role, such as someone telling you about an event where a child was harmed, and you have a child who is the same age and gender.

### **Burnout**

This occurs when the person becomes exhausted, cynical about their work, and they become largely ineffective at work. In the context of aid work it is often the case that workers will distance themselves from their clients by losing the capacity for empathy. Burnout is contrasted by engagement, which is characterized by energy, involvement and efficacy. There are several factors that lead to burnout that include prolonged stress, feeling overwhelmed by job duties and unsupportive administrators. Secondary or Vicarious Trauma can only occur in those situations where you work directly with traumatized individuals, but burnout can occur in any setting. In people who work with traumatized individuals, the symptoms of the two syndromes can overlap.

## **Developing Coping Strategies in the Field**

### **Normalizing Experience and Communication**

One of the most valuable strategies you can use is accepting that the work you do is often difficult and that you will be affected emotionally by your work. It is OK and completely normal to feel shocked, outraged, horrified, saddened or vulnerable at what you have seen or heard from clients. 99 out of 100 people who do this work will feel exactly the same way as you do, so we encourage you to speak to trusted colleagues about your experiences.

Quite often the simple sharing of experience with someone can be very beneficial and is a very effective means to cope with stressful situations. Try and arrange informal or formal situations that allow team members to speak about their experiences with others who do similar work. These types of situations allow you to see that others have very similar reactions, which is comforting. What usually transpires is that people share coping strategies and offer advice on how to proceed with difficult cases and importantly, it provides the opportunity for further communication. If you find that you are ruminating about an event or events in general, consider it a sign that you should speak with someone about your experiences. Also, if you are a religious or spiritual person, try speaking with others who share your faith about your experiences and make active use of your spirituality to find meaning.

### **Distraction**



Distraction can take many forms, but it is important to turn your attention away from work related activities when you are no longer at work. Quite often we become absorbed in our work to the detriment of other important areas of our life. Find non-work related activities that focus your attention; hobbies, recreational activities, outings with friends etc. The psychological and physical symptoms associated with stress are often associated with how much we think or ruminate about events; if you can shift your awareness to events or activities that you enjoy and away from stressful situations, then you will relax and feel reenergized.

Meditation could be considered a form of focused distraction. Most practices require you to clear your mind of thoughts, or focus on an enjoyable or neutral image, thus distracting you from stressful thoughts, and importantly, stopping you from ruminating. Also, make sure you use your rest and relaxation leave when you have the opportunity; take advantage of the chance to relax and enjoy some time away.

### **Boundaries**

If you are feeling overwhelmed, learn to say no to extra responsibilities. We all want to impress our colleagues and our managers, however there is only so much one can do during the day. Taking on too much does no one any good.

Learning how to be assertive yet respectful is an important skill and one that will go a long way to insuring that you do not burn out. Finally, and this is easier for some than others, realize that doing a good job means that there is only so much you can control, and there is only so much you can realistically accomplish during the day. Setting high standards is good, but appraise those standards on a regular basis so you don't set unattainable goals or develop unrealistic standards. Wanting to help and be of service is a valuable trait and drawing clear personal and professional boundaries will be helpful in maintaining a high quality of work of over the long term.

## Mind and Body



There are several techniques people use to relax that involve some degree of physical activity. Some people will use progressive muscle relaxation, some will use Tai Chi or Yoga, others will run, work out in a gym, hike or take long walks, and there are many other activities.

If you do not have already established a relaxation routine, we advise you to use our guide

**“Relaxation Techniques for Stress Relief”**

Try one of the activities described in there and see what you like; people choose what works for them based on idiosyncratic reasons.

Be cognizant that regular exercise and activity is a very simple and effective way to cope with stress in an adaptive manner. The second thing we often do when we become busy is let our diet slip, and we may choose quick and easy unhealthy foods over healthy and nutritious food. Eating healthy food on a regular schedule is always important.



*We hope that some of the information provided here will prompt you to commit yourself to adequate self-care, so important for all, your team, your family and, importantly, for the people you are meant to serve.*

*Staff Welfare Section*