

Well-Being Guide for Humanitarian Aid Workers During Emergency Responses

What is mental health and trauma? What are the effects of trauma?

Mental well-being is not merely the absence of apparent psychological distress.

In life, we all develop skills to cope with sources of stress, and when we encounter such sources of stress, we find our balance again by using our existing skills. Traumatic events that disrupt the ordinary course of life such as natural disasters, exposure to violence, accidents, war and migration directly threaten or carry the risk of threatening our physical and mental integrity. The stress created by these events can have an impact far beyond our adaptability. Instead of creating new coping mechanisms, the resulting emotions and subsequent behaviors may make us feel as if we are constantly experiencing the traumatic event.

Why should we be careful as humanitarian aid workers?

Traumatic events have similar effects not only for those directly exposed to such events, but also for those who witness them.

This situation, called 'secondary trauma', affects profession groups who directly contact with people, such as healthcare workers, humanitarian aid workers, police, firefighters and mental health workers.

Humanitarian aid workers working in the field of emergency response maybe faced with many stress sources such as working under the risk of getting harmed and witnessing people getting harmed, making critical decisions, working under a heavy workload and being away from family and loved ones.

Emotional exhaustion and desensitization caused by long-time preoccupation with stressful situations is called 'burnout'.

In the face of these sources of stress and the risk of secondary trauma, there are steps that can be taken by the emergency response workers to maintain their well-being and continue providing their services.

Unlike the people we support who are directly exposed to trauma, we can take measures to protect ourselves against this, and we can intervene to eliminate the symptoms by recognizing the signals of the negative emotions we experience.

What are the symptoms of secondary trauma and burnout?

→ **The symptoms of secondary trauma are:**

- Intense anxiety, feeling alert as if something bad is going to happen at any moment,
- Intense anger and loss of control,

- Physical hyperalertness,
- Fatigue,
- Weakened immune system,
- Recurring thoughts about traumatic events,
- Engaging in risky behaviors,
- Difficulty in focusing.

➔ **Burnout symptoms are:**

- Intense sorrow,
- Indifference and desensitization,
- Having a quick temper,
- Blaming others,
- Uneasiness,
- Isolation,
- Neglecting self-care,
- Tiredness, fatigue,
- Feeling of failure and inadequacy,
- Heavy alcohol/substance use.

Remember: Secondary traumatization and burnout;

- ➔ It is not a personal failure.
- ➔ It is not weakness.
- ➔ It is not weakness of will.
- ➔ It is different from our own traumatic experiences.
- ➔ It is different from our daily problems or ordinary work stress.

What can we do as humanitarian aid workers to protect ourselves?

➔ **Get prepared.**

- Obtain as much information as possible about the support you can provide.
- Inform your family and loved ones about working hours and when they

can reach you.

- Make a plan with your coworkers and managers for your ongoing work in the office, which are apart from your emergency response works.
- Get information about the region and the general structure of the city where you will go for emergency response.

→ **Recognize your emotions.**

- When working with people who have been or are still exposed to traumatic events, keep in mind that negative emotions may emerge and this is a part of the adaptation process to the new situation.
- Stay in touch with your family, friends, co-workers and supervisor, and share your feelings with them.
- Be aware that employees, officials and disaster victims may exhibit a more tense approach than normal, especially in situations such as disasters, migration, war, and do not take this situation personally.
- Observe which emotions emerge in which situations and with what intensity. For example, if you are getting angrier than you can handle when working with victims of violence, do not ignore this emotion, try to understand what makes you angry. Do not hesitate to seek support from your co-worker, manager or a mental health professional for this.

→ **Create sharing areas within the team.**

- Implement the well-being buddy system. In this system, two employees become a team and monitor each other's safety, workload, stress and psychological self-care. Try to get to know each other well with your well-being buddy; keep an eye on each other, track your workloads and create space for stress-reducing activities.

→ **Regulate your working time.**

- Work by taking breaks.
- Establish a balance between your personal life and work, and set boundaries.
- Especially in cases where the working hours system is out of order, shifts shouldn't be more than six hours for each team; intervals and time of the breaks should be discussed. Do not engage in any work-related activity during your break, set clear boundaries between your working and break times.
- Reduce the time you work alone and work as a team.



→ **Determine your work limits.**

- Make sure that you have received adequate training and information about your position and that you understand the limits of our responsibility. Focusing on what we can do within our personal and institutional capacity and limits helps us create a solution-oriented and efficient support system. We can cooperate and engage different resources to solve problems beyond our capacity.
- Share information regularly with team leaders and co-workers about work done.
- Before you start working, make sure that you talk to your co-workers and managers about planning, division of labor, and process. At the end of the day, try to create a space to talk about the ongoing and failing aspects, to evaluate the technical details, as well as to talk about your feelings.

→ **Pay attention to your physical needs.**

- Maintain a balanced diet, exercise, take enough time to sleep and rest.
- Physical injuries that may occur during emergency response may be ignored during the work. Do not ignore these situations and get support from healthcare professionals at the first available time.

→ **Pay attention to your psychological needs.**

- Continuing to do our routines when working with people who have been exposed to traumatic events enables our minds to protect itself automatically. Especially if you work far from your home and the city you live in, you should definitely take time to maintain your existing routines.
- Performing deep breathing exercises for a few minutes at regular intervals in cases of intense stress has a calming and stress-reducing effect that regulates your blood flow and nervous system. Take time for doing breathing and relaxation exercises.

→ **Take advantage of institutional support mechanisms.**

- It is the responsibility of the institution to support the emergency response worker's well-being. The worker has the right to request the following supports from the institution and the relevant managers:
 - Providing orientation to the emergency;
 - Definition of the response plan and strategy;
 - The availability and accessibility of guidance and coordination support;
 - Equal and rotational distribution of tasks;
 - Organization of rest and team building activities according to the work plan;
 - Monitoring of the well-being of employees.

→ **Maintain the social support system.**



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- When working with people who have been exposed to traumatic events, maintain relationships with your family, friends, and close circles in which you do not talk about your work.

Remember:

- It's not selfish to take a break.
- Our needs are not less important than the needs of the people we support.
- Working for longer periods does not mean we will be more useful.
- Being able to manage our stress makes the work we do more productive.
- There are also other people who can provide support.