

# managing stress in the field



International Federation  
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Cover photos: Howard DAVIES / Federation

© International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Any part of this handbook may be cited, copied, translated into other languages or adapted to meet local needs without prior permission from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, provided that the source is clearly stated.

2001

---

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

PO Box 372

CH-1211 Geneva 19

Switzerland

Telephone: +41 (22) 730 4222

Telefax: +41 (22) 733 0395

Telex: 412 133 FRC CH

E-mail: [secretariat@ifrc.org](mailto:secretariat@ifrc.org)

Web site: [www.ifrc.org](http://www.ifrc.org)

# Contents

---

Introduction _____	2
What is stress? _____	3
Cumulative stress _____	6
Coping with traumatic experiences _____	10
The psychological support programme for delegates _____	13
Short questionnaire on stress _____	16
Bibliography _____	18

# Introduction

---

In 1993, the Federation's General Assembly adopted a decision on the importance of "psychological support to victims of disasters and stressful life events". Soon, a series of conflict situations brought to light another category of people psychologically affected by disasters: relief workers. It appeared increasingly urgent to take care of Red Cross and Red Crescent delegates in situations of complex humanitarian disaster such as the Rwanda operation. Psychological support for the delegates became a major challenge.

Since 1993, the psychological support programme for delegates has gradually gained wide recognition within National Societies, the Secretariat and among delegates.

At present, there are two Federation-contracted, Geneva-based stress counsellors who are committed to supporting delegates during their assignments. Karine Bonvin and Christine Meinhardt have written the following text. They see the delegates for pre-mission briefing and post-mission debriefing, communicate with them in the field via telephone or e-mail and, if necessary, make visits to the field.

This leaflet is designed as a practical tool for delegates before, during and after their mission. Its aim is to help them to recognize, prevent and reduce stress in the field. We hope that it will encourage delegates to take care of themselves and each other and to make full use of their resources. Enjoy your mission!



Didier J. Cherpitel  
Secretary General

# What is stress?

---

**Stress is normal. It is the body's natural reaction in response to a physical and/or emotional challenge.**

Stress can be positive in activating a person's body, mind and energy. It can be defined as an individual's capacity to mobilize every resource the body has to react promptly and adequately to any given situation. However, if stress lasts too long, the body's resources will be exhausted and the person will develop harmful or negative forms of stress reactions.

## Basic stress

This is “baseline” or underlying stress. Basic stress may be caused by various sources of tensions at the individual, emotional, family or social levels. It may be increased by changes in the day-to-day environment (being away from family without adequate communication, working with new people from different cultures, uncertainty about work, new information to assimilate, etc.). Delegates need to be prepared for this and learn how to develop strategies to cope with it. Basic stress normally decreases after the first few weeks of a new assignment.

## Cumulative stress

This follows prolonged exposure to work and non-work stress factors and may develop into professional exhaustion known as “burn out”.

## Burn out

Burn out is an exhaustion of normal stress coping mechanisms.



Howard DAVIES / Federation

## Traumatic stress or critical incident stress

This is caused by situations outside the range of everyday experience, where the delegate's life is perceived to be under immediate threat, or if he/she witnesses or is subject to violence or a natural disaster.

In a certain number of cases, traumatic stress may further develop into **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**, a pathological condition which will require referral to a mental health specialist.

# Commonly reported causes of stress in the field

---

**Difficult living conditions**

**Heavy workload or inactivity**

**Relationships and communication**

Cultural differences

Lack of space and privacy / personality conflicts

**Lack of leisure activities, social or cultural life**

**Insecurity**

War / security incidents

Target for attack or robbery

**Threat to well-being / health risks**

Living under security constraints

Threat of after-effects or reoccurrence of disaster

Risk of accidents and illnesses

Lack of medical infrastructure

**Challenges to a person's values, ideals and beliefs**

Exposure to acute consequences of war, disasters or human carnage

Exposure to the ongoing suffering and trauma of victims

Corruption, ambiguous situations or motivations

Hostility of beneficiaries / unmet needs of beneficiaries

**Stress related to the delegate's family**

Stress of accompanying partner

Lack of communication with family back home

**Coming home**

Communication with family, friends, colleagues

Going back to "ordinary" life

**Financial instability**

Worry about future job opportunities

# Cumulative stress

---

Cumulative stress results from an accumulation of various stress factors such as a heavy workload, poor communications, the frustration of not being able to meet the beneficiaries' needs, having to cope with situations in which you feel powerless, lack of basic comforts, and inability to rest or relax. Under normal circumstances, it can be monitored by adequate personal and team stress management, but in some stressful situations such as disasters, cumulative stress can escalate quickly and develop into professional exhaustion known as "burn out".

Cumulative stress is the most frequent form of stress encountered in delegations. Delegates and heads of delegation should not underestimate it. Although it is, to a large extent, inherent in humanitarian and emergency work, staff must ensure that it remains within reasonable limits, taking into account the prevailing circumstances.

## How to recognize cumulative stress?



The key to identifying cumulative stress in an individual is changes in his/her behaviour.

### The most common signs of cumulative stress include:

**Physical symptoms:** overtiredness, diarrhoea, constipation, headaches, abdominal and back pains, sleeping disorders, appetite changes.

**Emotional signs:** anxiety, frustration, guilt, mood swings, undue pessimism or optimism, irritability, crying spells, nightmares, apathy, depression.

**Mental signs:** forgetfulness, poor concentration, poor job performance, negative attitude, loss of creativity and motivation, boredom, negative self-talk, paranoid thoughts.

**Relational signs:** feeling isolated, resentful or intolerant of others, loneliness, marriage problems, nagging, social withdrawal, anti-social behaviour.

**Behavioural changes:** increased alcohol, drug and/or tobacco use, change in eating habits or sexual behaviour, increase in risky behaviour, hyperactivity, avoidance of situations, cynical attitudes.

**Collapse of belief systems:** feeling of emptiness, doubt in religious beliefs, feeling unforgiven, looking for magical solutions, loss of purpose of life, needing to prove self-worth, cynicism about life.

**It is important that:**

- you realize that feelings of distress in yourself and others are legitimate and not signs of personal weakness or lack of professionalism;
- you take the responsibility for noticing the signs and symptoms showing that your coping mechanisms are overloaded; and
- you ensure that you get support, not only to deal with the symptoms of stress that are emerging within you, but also to identify and tackle the cause of the stress.

**In a team, the following group reactions may be the effect of cumulative stress:**

Anger towards managers

Lack of initiative

Clique formation (inner and outer “circle”)

Conflict between groups

High turnover of personnel

Negative attitude towards workplace

Critical attitudes towards colleagues

Scapegoat mentality

### Role of management

Managers can play a vital role in the prevention of cumulative stress, thereby maintaining a healthy work environment. Not only can they serve as a healthy role model for their staff, but they can also create opportunities to speak about tensions and communication problems arising in the delegation, facilitate the pursuit of extra curricular activities – such as sports – or organize a variety of social events.

If they notice negative trends they should provide the person affected with an opportunity to rest and talk about the causes of his/her stress. Depending on the seriousness of the situation, this may involve giving a long weekend off or R&R (rest and recreation) out of the country (where this policy rule applies).



Cumulative stress is avoidable and reversible: delegates and management have a common responsibility for its prevention.

## How to prevent cumulative stress?



Take care of yourself.  
Recognize the importance of an adequate support system.

### Use your personal resources fully

- Social network.
- Sufficient leisure activities.

### Know yourself

- Your resources.
- Your limits.
- Your stress reactions (see questionnaire on stress).

### Share – communicate – be clear

- Find someone to share your doubts, fears and disappointments with.
- Express your needs (to head of delegation, colleagues).
- Say “no” (for example, to unreasonable work demands).



Bjorn EDER / Federation

### Support each other

- Show that you care for your colleagues and listen to them.
- Avoid criticizing or playing down their remarks.
- Be alert to changes in behaviour and propose action if necessary (e.g., take a long weekend off).
- In case of security incidents, take time to talk and share emotions.

### Ask for support from Geneva

- From the health officer.
- From the stress counsellor (support by phone, e-mail or fax; visit, if necessary).

### Some tips

- Whenever possible, respect normal working hours. Avoid working on weekends.
- Allow sufficient time for rest, relief and relationships.
- Eat well-balanced meals at regular times. Avoid excessive alcohol.
- Keep your body fit. Do things that you enjoy.

# Coping with traumatic experiences

---

## What is a traumatic experience?

A traumatic experience is a major, upsetting event that you have undergone or witnessed. It may be that you have lost someone close to you or have been injured, involved in an accident, or subject to violence. You may have witnessed something that profoundly shocked you or have been involved in a threatening situation – war, massacre, natural or industrial disaster. Any of these events would have been upsetting to anyone.

After a traumatic experience, it is healthy and normal to react. Strong emotions may also arise from thoughts of what might have happened.

### Reactions during the first days and weeks:

- Everything feels unreal, nightmarish. It is difficult for you to understand and accept what has happened.
- You suffer from headache, feel sick or cold, sweat or have tense muscles.
- You feel sad, detached or emotionally numb.
- You are tense or nervous when reminded of the events and avoid situations that call to mind the trauma.
- You find it difficult to fall asleep or your sleep is broken, you have nightmares.
- The event keeps coming back to your thoughts.
- You relive the smells and sounds, see details of the incident.
- You are afraid the same horror will be repeated or that you are going mad.
- You repeatedly go over events, asking “Why did it happen?”, feeling responsible, and wishing you had done something different.

Some people react more strongly than others in the same situation.

With time these normal reactions caused by unusual situations are relieved. Your reactions help you to work through the experience in your mind. Little by little, you will recover from the traumatic experience and life will go on.

## How to help yourself?

- In case of a security incident or traumatic event, your head of delegation will advise you about administrative procedures. Talk to someone you feel at ease with, describing to him/her what you were thinking or feeling during or after the incident. You work through your unpleasant experiences when you talk about them.
- Remember that your reactions are normal and unavoidable. It is useful to voice even frightening and strange feelings. Sometimes it is easier to express your feelings by “doing” rather than talking. Draw, paint, write, play music or take exercise.
- Be conscious of your tension and purposefully try to relax. Slow your breathing and relax your muscles.
- Listen to what people close to you say and think about the incident. It has affected them too.
- Take special care of yourself. Try to keep eating well and avoid alcohol. Physical exercise is good for you because it relieves tensions.
- Continue to work on routine tasks if it is difficult to concentrate on demanding duties. Tell your colleagues and superiors about how this traumatic experience has affected you so that they can understand.
- If you can't sleep or feel too anxious, discuss this with someone you can trust or your head of delegation. Do not self-medicate, but get medical advice.
- Acknowledge your losses. Go easy on yourself. It takes time to evaluate how you will view things after a significant traumatic event has occurred.
- If, after a few weeks, you still feel you can't shake yourself or your reactions appear extreme, you should contact the Federation's health

officer or one of the Federation stress counsellors and talk about your reactions.

- On your return to Geneva, ask for a two-hour debriefing with the stress counsellor.

### **Remember**

Express your emotions and talk about them as soon as possible.

It is normal to have upsetting reactions after a traumatic event.

It takes time to recover from trauma.

If you feel “stuck”, get help. Don’t isolate yourself.



Mikkel OESTERGAARD / Federation

### **In the event of a security incident, the health and security officers must be informed immediately:**

International Federation’s Secretariat  
17, chemin des Crêts,  
P.O. Box 372  
1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland

Health officer’s tel.:

+ 41 22 730 4417 / + 41 79 217 3319

Health officer’s e-mail: [bernardi@ifrc.org](mailto:bernardi@ifrc.org)

Security officers’ tel.:

+ 41 79 202 0512 / + 41 79 217 3371

Security officers’ e-mail:

[planting@ifrc.org](mailto:planting@ifrc.org) / [tangen@ifrc.org](mailto:tangen@ifrc.org)

# The psychological support programme for delegates

---

## During your mission

The aim of the psychological support programme is to support each delegate during his/her assignment.

### If, during your mission:

- you experience stress;
- you are facing a difficult situation;
- you think a delegate needs help; or
- you want to talk to someone outside the delegation in a confidential manner or need advice,

*do not hesitate to contact us*

#### **Karine Bonvin de Greck**

24 rue des Grottes, 1201 Geneva  
Tel./Fax: + 41 22 740 26 66  
E-mail: kbonvin@hotmail.com

Asia-Pacific, Central Asia,  
Caucasus, Eastern Europe (except  
for former Yugoslavia, the Baltic  
states and the Federation's  
regional delegation in Budapest),  
Middle East.

#### **Christine Meinhardt**

4 rue Michel-Chauvet  
1208 Geneva  
Tel.: + 41 22 346 60 44  
Fax: + 33 450 44 07 32  
E-mail: cmeinhardt@wanadoo.fr

Africa, former Yugoslavia, the  
Baltic states, Americas.

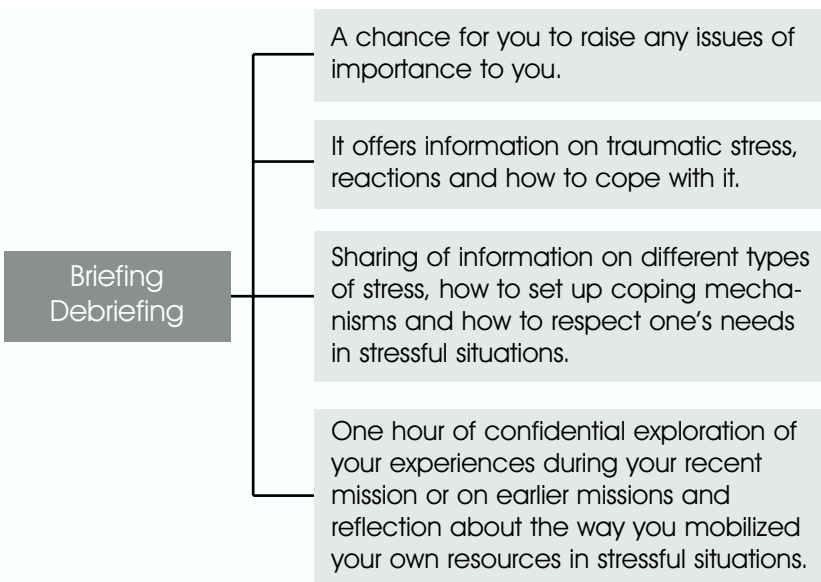
Leave a message on our answering machine, or send us an e-mail or a fax. We will call you back when it is convenient for you.

**You can also call the health officer, Selma Bernardi, in the employment relations service.**

Tel.: + 41 22 730 4417 or + 41 79 217 3319

E-mail: [bernardi@ifrc.org](mailto:bernardi@ifrc.org)

## Psychological briefing and debriefing



Briefing and debriefing sessions are confidential.

It is neither a counselling session, nor therapy, but rather a close look at how experiences may affect you in the future or may have affected you in the past.

### The aim is:

- to help you to reflect on and understand your reactions and responses during your mission;
- to review how you can use previous stressful experiences as a resource in your next assignment;
- to consider any personal matter; and
- in the case of a debriefing, to give an opportunity to think about your next step and or to consider your transition into “normal” life.

### Whom will you see?

- One of the two Federation stress counsellors. Each counsellor is responsible for certain countries, but the priority is to follow delegates through their different missions.

### What happens?

- You can raise any subject you wish to talk about.
- The stress counsellor will ask you questions to help you recall more of your experiences and reactions in stressful situations. She can also help you to reflect on how to prevent stress in the field and how to develop further your coping mechanisms.
- She will inform you about the support she can offer during an assignment.

# Short questionnaire on stress\*

---

**Interpretation:** No formal norms are available for this measure. Based on the content of the items, a score of 0-15 suggests the delegate is probably coping adequately with the stress of his or her work. A score of 16-25 suggests the worker is suffering from work stress and would be wise to take preventive action. A score of 26-35 suggests possible burn out. A score above 35 indicates probable burn out.

**Instructions:** Rate each of the following items in terms of how much the symptom was true of you in the last month.

0 = Never

1 = Occasionally

2 = Somewhat often

3 = Frequently

4 = Almost always

1. Do you tire easily? Do you feel fatigued a lot of the time, even when you have gotten enough sleep?
2. Are people annoying you by their demands and stories about their daily activities?  
Do minor inconveniences make you irritable or impatient?
3. Do you feel increasingly critical, cynical or disenchanted?

---

\* From "The relief worker burnout questionnaire" in *Coping with disaster*, a manual prepared for Mental Health Workers without Borders by John H. Ehrenreich, 1999.

4. Are you affected by sadness you can't explain? Are you crying more than usual?
5. Are you forgetting appointments, deadlines, personal possessions? Have you become absent-minded?
6. Are you seeing close friends and family members less frequently? Do you find yourself wanting to be alone and avoiding even your close friends?
7. Does doing even routine things seem like an effort?
8. Are you suffering from physical complaints such as stomach-aches, headaches, lingering colds, general aches and pains?
9. Do you feel confused or disoriented when the activity of the day stops?
10. Have you lost interest in activities that you previously were interested in or even enjoyed?
11. Do you have little enthusiasm for your work? Do you feel negative, futile, or depressed about your work?
12. Are you less efficient than you think you should be?
13. Are you eating more (or less), smoking more cigarettes, using more alcohol or drugs to cope with your work?
- TOTAL SCORE (Add up scores for items 1-13)

# Bibliography

---

Ehrenreich, John. *Coping with disaster*.

Available on: <http://www.mhwwb.org/contents.htm>

Finnish Red Cross. *You have experienced a shocking event*.

Helsinki: Finnish Red Cross.

Hawkins, Peter and Shohet, Robin. *Supervision in the helping professions*. Milton Keynes/Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1989.

International Committee of the Red Cross. *Coping with stress*. Geneva: ICRC, 1994.

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

*Teambuilding and personnel management in Federation delegations*.

Geneva: Federation, 1998.

Kristoffersen, J. *Stress management and psychological support*. Workshop compendium, Danish Red Cross, 1998. Prepared by the Center for Crisis Psychology, Bergen, Norway.

Mitchell, Jeff and Bray, Grady. *Emergency services stress*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990.

Rosen, G.M. *Coping with trauma*. 1989. Available from Carbrini Medical Tower, Seattle, WA 98104, USA.

# Notes

---





the power of humanity



The *International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies* promotes the humanitarian activities of National Societies among vulnerable people.

By coordinating international disaster relief and encouraging development support it seeks to prevent and alleviate human suffering.

The International Federation, the National Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross together constitute the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.