

Psychological support programme for delegates

Contact information

Selma Bernardi, Health Officer
International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
P.O. Box 372
1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland
Tel.: +41 22 730 44 17
E-mail: bernardi@ifrc.org

Karine Bonvin de Greck
24 rue des Grottes
1201 Geneva, Switzerland
Tel./fax: +41 22 740 26 66
E-mail : kbonvin@hotmail.com

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

Background/history

In the aftermath of a number of disasters in the early 1990s, the necessity and importance of addressing the psychological needs of victims were amply demonstrated. This led to the establishment of the psychological support programme (PSP) of the International Federation in May 1991. The International Federation's General Assembly adopted a decision on the importance of psychological support in 1993.

However, a series of conflict situations brought to light another category of people psychologically affected by disasters: relief workers. Many Red Cross and Red Crescent delegates who had worked in relief operations (in Rwanda and Somalia, for example) came back feeling lost, isolated, depressed and completely exhausted, and suffering from nightmares and flashbacks. They often found it difficult to talk about their feelings of helplessness and horror to family, friends and colleagues who could not fully understand what they had been through or were not interested. It became increasingly apparent, therefore, that delegates needed specialized psychological debriefings.

Since 1992, the International Federation has contracted a psychotherapist, who is not an International Federation staff member, to debrief delegates and to visit the most exposed delegations in the field. A second consultant psychotherapist joined the programme in 1994. Gradually, psychological support to delegates has gained wider recognition within National Societies¹, the Secretariat and among delegates.

¹ Other National Societies have followed this example and have hired psychotherapists to support their delegates.

Objectives

- To prevent the stress and psychological problems related to humanitarian work. Although crises, suffering and stressful life situations are inherent to this type of profession, it is important to prevent possible cumulative stress both during and after a mission so that delegates can carry out their functions and avoid “burn out”.
- To raise awareness within the International Federation of the harmful effects of stress on humanitarian workers.
- To develop the coping skills of both individuals and teams.
- To set up a well-functioning support system before, during and after missions.

Brief description of activities

- **Psychological briefing.** Delegates are advised about typical reactions and symptoms of stress and trauma. The psychotherapists highlight the importance of:
 - developing and using the delegates’ own coping mechanisms, and being aware of their limits and stress reactions;
 - sharing and good communications among team members;
 - supporting each other; and
 - asking for psychological support if necessary.
- **Monitoring.** During a mission, monitoring involves keeping in touch with potentially vulnerable delegates and responding to situations in the field which require psychological support intervention.
- **Debriefing.** All delegates can, if they wish, be debriefed by a consultant psychotherapist on their return to Geneva. These sessions are strictly personal and confidential.
- **Developing PSP.** The psychotherapists assist National Societies in the development of their own psychological support programmes for delegates.

Major elements of the programme

The International Federation’s health officer and two external consultants form the International Federation team in charge of the PSP for delegates. The health officer is the liaison between the International Federation, National Societies, delegates and the psychotherapists. The team is based in Geneva.

The aim of psychological debriefing after a mission is to allow the delegate to unburden him/herself, gain feedback on stress and other factors affecting his/her psychological well-being and ease the re-entry process. When a problematic situation is identified, the psychotherapist will first discuss the different possible options with the delegate, for example, the possibility of taking a long holiday, arranging for psychological support after the mission, planning his/her future orientation, identifying his/her support network.

Partnerships and alliances

The psychotherapists work closely with other International Federation departments. It is seeking to strengthen its alliance with the International Federation Reference Centre for Psychological Support in Copenhagen and with National Societies. The team also has

informal discussions with stress counsellors from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Monitoring and evaluation

An external evaluation was undertaken by Dr. Gerard A. Jacobs, of the University of South Dakota's Mental Health Institute in February 1998. A number of his recommendations have been incorporated in the strategy for the future. An annual report is also prepared by the psychotherapists.

The future

A number of policy decisions will need to be taken in the International Federation if the PSP is to achieve its goals. These include plans for training, a policy concerning the abuse of alcohol, and the possibility for more family postings.

In the future, the programme will focus on the following:

- Promoting training on stress management, critical incident debriefing, conflict resolution and cross-cultural management.
- Developing a global network to support traumatized delegates and those suffering from burn out, both during their mission and on their return home. Developing PSP in National Societies for the follow-up of these delegates in their home countries is a priority of the programme.
- Ensuring that delegates working on an International Federation contract benefit from adequate support and psychological follow-up after their mission. This is especially the case for locally recruited delegates or those recruited by the International Federation through a National Society, who come from countries where there is as yet inadequate psychological support.
- Supporting locally employed staff in the case of security incidents, trauma, etc.
- Promoting training for Geneva staff members who are dealing with stressful situations either in their work or in their contact with delegations.
- Promoting research on psychological health and the impact of humanitarian work on current and former delegates.
- Encouraging managers to propose psychological support missions to the field in emergency operations, difficult countries facing security problems, in conflict situations, etc.
- Developing, with the International Federation, better tools to support teams and delegates who face difficulties in the field. The priority is on prevention and early diagnosis so that conflicts in teams, which can be painful and destructive, are avoided.

In June 2000, the team sent a questionnaire to managers in the field. The survey sought to define the major difficulties faced by delegates and managers during missions. Its results confirmed feedback received during past debriefings and will allow the PSP team to better adjust the programme to the needs of its beneficiaries.

Lessons learned

- Although prevention is better than cure, it is harder to assess. The PSP's effectiveness cannot yet be evaluated with data and figures. However, the programme seems to have

raised people's awareness of the effects of stress and trauma and more delegates and heads of delegation are asking for support. Increasing personal and collective awareness will contribute to reducing stress.

- To improve the programme, more research needs to be done on the after-effects of humanitarian work and on stress, compassion fatigue and trauma.
- Within the International Federation, the gradual change in mentality concerning psychological support is a measure of the programme's effectiveness. Among individuals and the organization as a whole, the idea that "helpers also need help" and that "taking care of oneself is professional" is now generally accepted.
- In the International Federation's Secretariat, an increasing number of managers have openly supported the programme and have requested that a psychotherapist visit delegations in the field. Previously, the psychotherapists had to propose field visits if they thought the situation warranted it.
- Heads of delegation have emphasized the importance of being trained in stress management and conflict resolution. Many have also said they would like to learn more about how to defuse stressful situations.
- The programme aims to build up and offer a service to delegates based on trust. This trust can only be achieved when all sessions and contact between the psychotherapist and the delegate are entirely confidential. The programme's mental health professionals are also committed to other ethical principles (respect of a person's feelings, beliefs and culture, and the duty to assist a person in danger). It is important for the success of the programme that the team has trustworthy working relationships with others in the International Federation and that the rules of confidentiality have been defined and accepted by all concerned.
- An established, reliable network is also important in order to discuss ways to help delegates in need of support, to avoid rumours and gossiping, and to ensure that the delegates will not be "labelled" by the institution, but will be offered adequate assistance.
- The psychotherapists seek to accompany and support delegates in the best possible way for them, respecting their personality and backgrounds. The PSP professionals must maintain their status of "neutral" outsiders, taking care when sharing with others concerns expressed by the delegates.
- Delegates are helped to find their own solutions to the problems they have evoked, but the psychotherapists take action when they feel a person is in danger and unable to recognize it, for example in cases of burn out, trauma or serious alcohol problems.
- When working under extremely stressful conditions, both managers and delegates may be affected by disasters and dangers. They may be as overwhelmed by their own fears and feelings of helplessness as the victims of the disaster. But too often, humanitarian workers have neglected their physical and mental health. It is important that they recognize their needs and their limits and that they talk about the impact the events have had on them. Clarifying their ideas and feelings will help them to reach out for the operational or personal support that will allow them to achieve their mission successfully.
- Humanitarian organizations must also recognize their responsibility in safeguarding the physical and mental health of their staff. If organizations send delegates into a complex disaster situation without sufficient material and manpower, even their most experienced and qualified delegates may suffer from burn out.
- Before sending the psychotherapists to the field, it is important first to define the problem clearly by analysing the general situation with the different protagonists and then to decide on the level of expertise needed to tackle it. It must not be forgotten that they are in the field to deal with psychological problems only.