

# Managing stress in the field



International Federation  
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

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International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

P.O. Box 372

CH-1211 Geneva 19

Switzerland

Tel. : +41 22 730 4222

Fax : +41 22 733 0395

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

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

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# Introduction

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Knowledge and awareness of the effects of stress and trauma on humanitarian workers have gradually increased over the past decade. Stress reactions today are no longer seen as a sign of weakness or vulnerability but as a natural human reaction when confronted to extreme situations, violence and suffering.

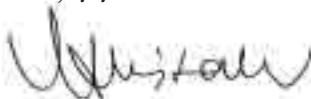
The nature of humanitarian work has also drastically changed over the last decade. Humanitarian workers have paid dearly in the face of violence and terrorism. Burn out and after-effects of traumatic experiences constitute a major risk for humanitarian workers. After ten years of experience with delegate stress, the Psychological Support Programme (PSP) team emphasizes the importance of efficient stress management.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has set up a PSP-team for their delegates in response to these needs. Since 1993 psychological support has been available to delegates in Geneva and delegations.

This publication has been conceived as a practical manual. The different types of stress experienced by delegates are described along with the associated symptoms. It highlights the importance of identifying and knowing personal, team and organisational resources. This second version has been adapted to reflect updated needs and experiences. It incorporates a new self-assessment questionnaire at the end of the booklet. Increasing delegates' knowledge of stress management will avoid potential risks to their psychological and physical health.

We hope this booklet will encourage delegates to take care of themselves and each other and to make full use of their resources.

Enjoy your mission!



Markku Niskala  
Secretary general

November 2003 - June 2008

# What is stress?

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**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.



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## 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

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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).

### **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.

# Preventing burnout

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When stress accumulates over a long period of time delegates can reach a point where they feel they just “can’t take it any more”. They feel emotionally exhausted, as if they were “burnt out”.

People who choose to involve themselves in humanitarian work often bring with them qualities of idealism and altruism. They set high personal standards, are results-oriented and expect to be able to “make a difference”. These very qualities can increase vulnerability to stress, especially when needs are overwhelming, resources are limited or assistance to the beneficiaries is frustrated in other ways. Burnout has become one of the major risks for those who choose to undertake a career in this changing humanitarian environment where physical and financial insecurity are on the increase.

## Development of burnout

One does not suddenly burn out: The person undergoes a process marked by physical, emotional and behavioral indicators that could have been identified and addressed at an early stage. Research demonstrates that ignoring, denying or neglecting warning signs over the years gradually induces a state of burn out.

## Signs of burnout

**Emotional exhaustion constitutes the main characteristic of burn out. The symptoms of cumulative stress have intensified and become chronic.**

- Chronic sleeping disorders, somatic problems and exhaustion
- Deterioration of mental capacities, loss of memory and efficiency
- Loss of self esteem, focus on failure
- Profound disillusionment, sometimes rejection of values
- Unwillingness to take leave, risk taking
- In some instances panic or paranoid attacks, severe depression

## Causes of burnout

### **Systemic causes**

- Lack of support and recognition
- Unstable environment (security and health risks, job insecurity)
- No control over the situation
- Unwanted organisational changes
- Competitiveness in the workplace

### **Personal causes**

- Ongoing life stress
- Helpers have few traditions of taking care of themselves
- Poor physical, mental and emotional state
- High degree of perfectionism and idealism

## Prevention measures

### **Organisational responsibility:**

Managers should be capable of recognizing the early signs of cumulative stress and burnout and realize the importance of adequate support and action. Top management should look into ways of reducing stress coming from inside the organization.

### **Personal responsibility:**

In order to prevent burnout, have a discussion with your supervisor concerning excessive workload, take breaks and time for rest, foresee taking regular holidays during your assignment, and take sufficient time off between missions.

Several months of break from work are usually necessary for recovery after a case of burnout. Get help from professionals (doctor, counselor etc.). Make radical changes in life-style and working habits.

# Coping with traumatic stress

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## What is traumatic stress/critical incident?

Traumatic stress is a reaction to an event outside the range of normal experience (traumatic event or critical incident). An event can be traumatic if it is sudden and unexpected, disrupts one's sense of control, and may involve the perception of a life threat.

- Warfare, violent physical attack, rape, robbery, hostage situation, natural disaster

A witness to these events may also experience an intense, emotional reaction.

## Acute stress reactions

After a traumatic event/critical incident, it is healthy and normal to react. Strong reactions may arise from thoughts of what might have happened.

### **Reactions during the first hours:**

- Shock, disbelief, feeling of being overwhelmed
- Strong emotional reaction or detachment
- Confusion, difficulty in making decisions
- Physical reactions: nausea, dizziness, intense fatigue, sleeping difficulties, muscle tremors...

### **Additional reactions during the first days and weeks:**

- Persistent, intrusive recollections (flashbacks) of the incident , nightmares
- Tendency to avoid certain aspects of the incident (places, thoughts, emotions, activities )
- Hyper-alertness accompanied by a startle reflex, quick temper and sleeping disorders

All these stress reactions, however worrying they may be, are perfectly normal consequences of a high stress level.

## Post traumatic stress disorder

If the above signs last for more than one to three months they may lead to a condition known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

This is a complication of acute stress disorder which could be compared to a wound that will not heal naturally. You may experience:



Mikkel OESTERGARD/International Federation

- Persistent tendency to relive the traumatic incident
- Avoidance of “triggers” (things that remind the person of the incident)
- Inadequate hyper-alertness
- Persistent depression
- “Numb” appearance

These reactions may be delayed and can even suddenly appear a few months or even years later.

- If you feel stuck or your reactions appear extreme, get help.
- Remember it takes time to recover from a traumatic incident
- Don't isolate yourself. Take contact with the Federation Health-Officer or one of the stress counselors.

## Caring for personnel after a traumatic experience

### **Give support as a “standard procedure”**

It is extremely important that managers or colleagues offer simple and caring support as soon after the incident as possible.

- Actively listen
- Provide factual information and support
- Inform family members
- Help the person to re-establish his/her daily routine
- The 4 “T”s: Talk, Tears, Time and Tea

## Self-help strategies

After such traumatic event, it is extremely important to take care of yourself in order to minimize the impact of the experience.

- Give words to the experience
- Call, talk or be with someone
- Get information on usual reactions you may be experiencing.
- Use physical exercise, music, rest, breathing and relaxation to reduce tension
- Monitor intake of coffee, alcohol and nicotine
- Keep to a daily routine as much as is possible

### **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 telephone number:**

+41 22 730 4417 / +41 79 217 33 19

**Health officer's e-mail:** hannele.haggman@ifrc.org

#### **Security officer's telephone number:**

+41 79 217 3371 / +41 79 251 8015 / +41 79 308 9842

#### **Security officer's e-mail:**

security.unit@ifrc.org



# The psychological support programme for delegates

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## 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 the stress counsellors*

#### **Karine Bonvin**

24 rue des Grottes,  
1201 Geneva, Switzerland  
Tel./Fax: + 41 22 740 26 66  
E-mail:  
karine.bonvin@ifrc.org

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

#### **Christine Meinhardt**

4 rue Michel-Chauvet  
1208 Geneva, Switzerland  
Tel.: + 41 22 346 60 44  
Fax: + 33 450 44 07 32  
E-mail:  
christine.meinhardt@ifrc.org

*Africa, former Yugoslavia,  
the Baltic states, Americas.*

# Short questionnaire on stress

This short questionnaire can help you to evaluate your present stress level. Take the time to fill it out every three months in order to compare the scores.

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

	Never (score 1)	Once a month (score 2)	Often/once a week (score 3)	Always (score 4)
1 I feel tense and nervous				
2 I have physical aches and pain				
3 I am always tired, physically and mentally				
4 The smallest noise makes me jump				
5 My work no longer interest me				
6 I act impulsively and take a lot of risks				
7 I can't get distressing events out my mind				
8 I am sad and feel like crying				
9 I am less efficient than I use to be				

	Never (score 1)	Once a month (score 2)	Often/once a week (score 3)	Always (score 4)
10 I have trouble planning and thinking clearly				
11 I have difficulty in sleeping				
12 Doing even routine things is an effort				
13 I am cynical or very critical				
14 I have bad dreams or nightmares				
15 I am irritable, minor inconveniences or demands annoy me a lot				
16 I am spending more time at work (hours/days) than initially				
Total				

Add up your total score:

**Under 20:** Your state of stress is normal, given the working conditions

**From 21 – 35:** You may be suffering from stress and should take it easy. Discuss with your manager and look for ways to reduce your stress level

**Above 36:** You may be under severe stress. Ask for help from someone close to you and/or from your supervisor, manager, Federation health officer, one of the stress counsellors or contact your doctor.

*(From: John Ehrenreich)*

# List your personal signs of cumulative stress

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Physical symptoms:

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Emotional reactions:

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Mental signs:

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Relational signs:

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Behavioural changes:

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Spiritual/Existential signs:  
(ex. loss of trust and convictions)

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## Breathing exercise

*Slowing down your respiratory rhythm leads to an overall slowing down, physically and mentally.*

Regularly practicing this breathing exercise will give you an efficient stress management tool. After a traumatic experience this exercise can help to calm down overexcitement and reduce anxiety and the occurrence of flashbacks.

- Sit with your feet well grounded on the floor and your body muscles as relaxed as possible.
- Breathe in slowly, without forcing, as if inhaling through a straw or a flute while counting from one to five until your lungs are filled. Hold the air briefly.
- Then breathe out slowly, without forcing, as if expiring through a straw by counting down from five to one. Pause briefly with your lungs empty, and then repeat the entire breathing exercise again until you are feeling calm.

## Active relaxation

It is difficult to relax once you are tense. This technique will use provoked tension to get relaxation.

You can either sit or stand up. Take a few seconds to be aware of how your body is feeling.

Breathe in, hold your inspiration and strongly tense all the muscles of your face, neck and throat for as long as you can.

Breathe out, relaxing all your muscles.

Take a few seconds to observe how you feel.

Breathe in, hold your inspiration and tense just your arms and hands.

Breathe out, relaxing all your muscles.

Continue with all the different parts of your body- back, chest, belly, buttocks, legs and feet, one after the other.

At the end, tense all the muscles of your body at the same time, holding your breath for as long as you can.

Breathe out and relax. Observe what is going on in your body.

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# The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

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## **Humanity**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

## **Impartiality**

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

## **Neutrality**

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

## **Independence**

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

## **Voluntary Service**

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

## **Unity**

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

## **Universality**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.



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.