

# Managing stress in humanitarian workers

Guidelines for good practice

second edition

ANTARES  
FOUNDATION



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Guidelines for good practice

*Care & Cohesion:  
Social Capital and Support in  
Humanitarian Aid*



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## Visual Representation of the Guidelines



## Foreword

This booklet is one of the outcomes of a long-established collaboration between professionals from quite diverse fields of expertise. Throughout its existence the Antares Foundation has brought together individuals experienced in humanitarian aid, psychology and academic research, who share a passionate engagement with humanitarian aid provision. The voluntary effort of this group of Antares associates sets an excellent example of how knowledge can be shared and common goals can be set within a network of individuals.

As a matter of fact, it is this very potential of social capital that can also make humanitarian action work better. The Antares 2006 conference 'Care and Cohesion' addressed the synergy of actions of the different players within the humanitarian aid theatre and within separate operational teams. It showed the relevance of mutual trust, knowledge sharing and cooperative action.

Humanitarian aid provision as a sphere of work, however, is often characterized by unpredictability, ongoing disturbances and insecurity. These circumstances threaten the quality of the aid provided and may also result in serious stress in aid workers. The need for aid agencies to manage stress in their staff is obvious. Activities of the Antares Foundation aim at raising awareness of this need amongst policy makers and managers, and at training and assisting teams and individual aid workers in better coping with the stressors of humanitarian work.

Although all stress cannot be avoided and is intrinsic to humanitarian work, some stress can be prevented or reduced. The consequences of stress in individual staff members can be mitigated or responded to by action taken by the staff members personally, colleagues, managers and the agency as a whole. We believe that there is a responsibility within the individual team member and within the agency to address stress, for health and good practice reasons. And, ultimately, our beneficiaries, those who are affected by humanitarian crises, will also benefit.

These Guidelines for Good Practice intend to help the agency and its staff to address stress within the organization and within themselves.

As Chair of the Board of the Antares Foundation, I am proud to be able to introduce this revised edition. I invite you all to read, use and comment on it.

**Pim Scholte, MD**  
Chairman Antares Foundation

# Introduction

## Background

Humanitarian aid administered through non-governmental organizations all over the world has developed from small-scale aid through private initiatives, missionaries, charities, communities and foundations to institutionalized organizations and bodies.

Though more professional, better equipped and prepared, the humanitarian organizations today are much more affected by the changing consequences of their work e.g. direct exposure to misery, magnitude of numbers of affected people of humanitarian crises, deteriorating safety and security context and limited available resources.

Good staff care and psycho social care for aid workers has proven to be an important asset in stress management and the prevention and treatment of traumatic and posttraumatic stress.

Though the awareness on these issues exists in most organizations, adequate care systems for national and international staff are often underdeveloped and lack attention and resources.

Having worked both within and as a consultant to national and international humanitarian agencies worldwide, the Antares Foundation has recognized the importance of addressing stress on all levels in many organizations. Requests for information, ideas and strategies for developing a stress program for humanitarian workers has led to the development and revision of these Guidelines.

## The Antares Foundation and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Since 2001 the Antares Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control and prevention in Atlanta, USA jointly organize conferences and meetings on 'Stress and the Humanitarian Aid Workers' in Amsterdam on a yearly basis.

The conferences resulted in a long term project, funded by CDC, with the objective to mitigate stress within humanitarian organizations. Next to raising awareness on consequences of stress, development of the 'Guidelines for Good Practice', a longitudinal study amongst on stress started with the aim to provide in depth and scientifically valid information regarding

mental health status of humanitarian workers working under stress and in hardship.

In this unique cooperation, practical experience and theoretical knowledge are combined and networks from research institutes, NGOs and health specialists are brought together, and are working towards an integrated approach for mitigating stress in the humanitarian aid workers.

## Objective

The objective of the Guidelines for Good Practice is to facilitate the NGOs in defining their own needs in relation to stress management in their organization. This will be different for every NGO, whether national or international, big or small. And although the principles should be universal, the implementation and indicators will depend on the context and culture of the organization.

The guidelines are meant as an orientation for organizations that are interested in developing their own staff care system. We believe that the principles are valid for all organizations, small or large, national or international. Protocols and policies can vary from just one page to a comprehensive book; however the managers of the organizations will need to feel responsible for the implementation and we hope these principles will assist them in this task.

This second edition of the guidelines is not meant to be prescriptive. It has been developed by national and international NGO workers and health specialists. We whole heartily invite you to provide us with comments, your feedback on feasibility, and your ideas and experiences with staff support.

## Process and progress

This draft is a result of three years of working with an international specialist working group, coordinated by the Antares Foundation. The initial principles were developed in a three day meeting in Amsterdam in 2003 by the core working group. The research working group contributed valuable comments during all those years. Participants of the conferences gave their

opinion and feedback from national and international field managers was gathered during meetings in Jerusalem, Melbourne and Canberra (Australia), New York, Tbilisi (Georgia) and Tuzla (Bosnia).

The working group, in cooperation with an interactive design and communication specialist, developed a graphic, which visualizes the principles from these guidelines and can assist as a tool for training and clarification. A sample of this graphic accompanies the guidelines. The graphic is available in poster size and can be ordered through the Antares Foundation.

The Code of Conduct of People in Aid has been a starting point. We fully embrace and acknowledge the Code and feel that these Guidelines are complementary to the Code.

## Next steps

The Antares Foundation will facilitate the development of a 'workbook' consisting of training materials, sample protocols for assessment of agency practices and for monitoring stress in individuals and teams, as well as case studies and sample policies. Next to that, the Antares Foundation will develop 'pilot' programs within national and international NGOs. During these pilots, developed materials, guidelines and programs will be tested before they will be made available to NGOs in future.

We will continue to seek feedback and comments through our network of specialists, NGOs and institutes. We hope these guidelines will assist you in developing stress management in your organization. We invite you to share your experiences and ideas with us.

# Guiding Principle

## Managing staff stress is good management practice

*Managing stress in staff of humanitarian aid organizations is an integral management priority in enabling the organization to fulfil its field objectives, as well as necessary to protect the well being of the individual staff members, their teams and the communities they work with.*

### Why is that important?

Humanitarian aid work is inherently stressful. While stress can be a source of growth and although many humanitarian aid workers withstand the rigors of their work without adverse effects, many others do not. Both anecdotal reports and empirical studies have abundantly documented the negative emotional consequences of exposure to these stressors on various groups of humanitarian workers. These adverse consequences may include post-traumatic stress syndromes, burnout, depression and anxiety, over-involvement or over-identification with beneficiary populations or, conversely, callousness and apathy towards beneficiaries, self destructive behaviours such as drinking and dangerous driving, and interpersonal conflict with co-workers or with family members

Staff stress and burnout have an adverse impact on the ability of the agency to provide services to those directly impacted. Workers suffering from the effects of stress are likely to be less efficient and less effective in carrying out their assigned tasks. They become poor decision makers and they may behave in ways that place themselves or other members of the team at risk or disrupt the effective functioning of the team. They are more likely to have accidents or to become ill. A consequence for humanitarian agencies is that staff stress and burnout may impede recruitment and retention of qualified staff, increase health care costs, compromise safety and security of staff and create legal liabilities.

Humanitarian aid organizations bear a dual responsibility. They must effectively carry out their primary mission and, at the same time, they must protect the wellbeing of their staff. The latter role goes beyond a mere duty to shield employees from harm and ensure that they are 'good workers', however. The agency has a responsibility, consistent with their humanitarian objectives, to foster resiliency and strengthen human capacity. The agency should be

committed to encouraging staff to develop their own skills and knowledge and to enhancing expertise which will increase the likelihood of the agency achieving its field-based objectives.

Although stress is intrinsic to humanitarian aid work, some stress can be prevented or lessened and the effects of stress on individual staff members can be mitigated or responded to by actions undertaken by individual staff members, by managers and supervisors, or by the agency as a whole. The following guidelines are intended to enable the agency to act in ways that minimize the risk of adverse consequences for its employees.

The Guidelines for Good Practice are organized around **eight key Principles**. Each of the principles has supporting **Indicators** and **Comments** designed to assist the reader to more fully understand the concepts underpinning the principles and how they translate into management practice. The accompanying diagram provides a visual representation of the Principles as they apply to the phases of humanitarian work. The principles and indicators are intended to apply to both international and national staff, office and field staff, recognizing that adjustments may be necessary to take into account the unique needs and characteristics of each group. They constitute a tool for learning, reflection and planning rather than a set of rigid rules or solutions that are applicable under all conditions.

# The principles

**Principle 1** The agency has a written and active policy to prevent or mitigate the effects of stress

### Policy

**Principle 2** The agency systematically screens and/or assesses the current capacity of staff members to respond to and cope with the anticipated stressors of an assignment.

### Screening and Assessing

**Principle 3** The agency ensures that all employees have appropriate pre-assignment preparation and training in managing stress.

### Preparation and Training

**Principle 4** The agency ensures the monitoring of the response to stress of its staff on an ongoing basis.

### Monitoring

**Principle 5** The agency is providing training and support, on an ongoing basis, to help its staff deal with the daily stresses of humanitarian aid work.

### Ongoing Support

**Principle 6** The agency provides staff with specific and culturally appropriate support in the wake of critical or traumatic incidents and other unusual and unexpected sources of severe stress.

### Crisis Support

**Principle 7** The agency provides practical, emotional and culturally appropriate support for staff at the end of an assignment or contract. This includes a personal stress review and an operational debriefing.

### End of Assignment Support

**Principle 8** The agency has clear written policies with respect to the ongoing support they will provide to staff members who have been adversely impacted by exposure to stress and trauma during their assignment.

### Post Assignment Support

## Principle 1

### The agency has a written and active policy to prevent or mitigate the effects of stress

The policy reflects the agency's understanding of the impact of stress on their staff and integrates staff support within the organization's operational framework. It describes specific policies, programs, and practices to create a comprehensive supportive environment for staff. It carries a commitment to examine all aspects of the agency's operations with respect to their effect on managing and mitigating stress in employees (screening and assessing; training and preparation; monitoring; ongoing support; crisis support; debriefing & re-entry support; end of assignment specific support). The plan includes observable outcome indicators with regard to staff well-being.

#### Indicators

1. The agency has a written policy for responding to stress that covers:
  - a. normally expected stresses of humanitarian work;
  - b. unexpected circumstances (such as forces evacuations or critical incidents).
2. The agency warns and educates potential staff members about the general risks of humanitarian work including the specific risks of the project(s) they will be assigned to, and any individual risks they may face as a result of their gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, or other predisposing personal factors.
3. The agency has a specific strategy for reducing risks for each individual project. This should include for example, an assessment of safety and security risks; physical health risks; risk of exposure to trauma, death, suffering and destruction.
4. The agency routinely reviews protective and supportive organizational policies and protocols aimed at reducing staff stress. For example:
  - a. policies forbidding discrimination against staff based on gender, race, nationality or sexual orientation, and forbidding bullying or sexual, racial, and emotional harassment of any individual or group of staff members;
  - b. personnel policies that reduce potential organizational and 'bureaucratic' sources of stress and enhance staff resilience;
5. The agency recognizes that the support needs of local, national and international staff are likely to be different and subsequently devises stress policies and supportive practices that match the specific needs of staff.
6. The agency regularly evaluates and updates its policies and practices to reduce and mitigate the effects of stress.
7. The agency asks its staff members to comply with agency policy and procedures aimed at reducing stress.
8. The agency encourages individual staff members to hold the agency to its commitment to actively mitigate the effects of stress.

#### Comments

It would be easy to imagine that stress is something that happens to staff in the field solely as a result of traumatic or very stressful field experiences. If this were the case, then stress management would consist merely of intervening when something goes wrong, for example, when a critical incident occurs or a staff member shows signs of burnout.

In reality, every aspect of an agency's functioning through each of the phases of assignment has an impact on the stress experienced by staff, for example, hiring and assignment procedures at the pre-assignment phase.

Other factors such as contract terms, staff benefits, procedures for decision making, grievance procedures and administrative efficiency can also be sources of stress for a staff member. Likewise policies regarding communication and information sharing within the organization as well as provisions for supervision and support of field workers; rules and regulations concerning vacations; policies regarding work hours and policies for communicating with home all have the potential to add to the stress of being in the role of a humanitarian aid worker.

# Screening and Assessing

## Principle 2

**The agency systematically screens and /or assesses the current capacity of staff members to respond to and cope with the anticipated stressors of an assignment.**

Screening of a staff member is recommended prior to general hiring.

A more thorough assessment should be made prior to a specific project.

### Indicators

1. The agency has an understanding of the minimum health and resiliency requirements for high risk and high stress assignments.
2. Both prospective staff and staff seeking new assignments are screened and/or assessed as to the likelihood of adverse or maladaptive responses to the risks and stresses of humanitarian aid work.
3. The results of such screenings/assessments are used to suitably match staff members to specific assignments.
4. Appropriately trained interviewers are used for screening and assessing staff.
5. The individual seeking employment or assignment is held responsible for disclosing information that may be relevant to assessing the risks involved in an assignment.

### Comments

Screening or assessing new and ongoing staff addresses both the risks and stresses of humanitarian aid work in general and the risks and stresses specific to the particular project to which the worker will be assigned. It also considers factors relevant to creating an effective team.

Assessment includes an evaluation of:

- a. physical and psychological health, past and present;
- b. influential life events (including past exposure to traumatic events and how they have been dealt with);
- c. personal characteristics such as resiliency, coping mechanisms, and motives for undertaking humanitarian aid work;
- d. the ability of the staff member to work in a team.
- e. how past difficulties in personal and professional life have been dealt with;
- f. the staff member's needs with respect to training and or support if they are to carry out their assignment effectively and with minimal adverse effects from the stresses of the assignment.

In carrying out such screenings and assessments, the agency adheres to legal obligations and ethical standards as to what can be asked and what should not

be asked. It recognizes, however, that, if performing a job properly requires certain psychological or physical characteristics, then inquiry into these characteristics and hiring or assignment decisions based on these standards is generally considered ethically and legally legitimate.

The screenings and assessments should be seen as a constructive guide to assignment, training, and ongoing support.

The agency maintains transparency to the prospective or actual employee with respect to expectations and the nature of their future assignment. Conversely, the individual seeking employment or assignment is responsible for revealing information that may be relevant to assessing the risks involved in an assignment for that employee and the training and support that they would need to handle it successfully. Failure by the individual staff member to disclose such information mitigates the responsibility of the organization but does not release the organization from the responsibility of carrying out a thorough assessment.

### Case

An experienced aid worker applies to work in a field management role in Iraq, a country that he worked in three years ago. She had a difficult 12 month assignment in Afghanistan prior to applying for this one and has decided against a vacation because of financial constraints. The region of the assignment is on high security alert and the political and social culture of the region has changed substantially over the past two years.

The hiring NGO acknowledges the competency and capacity of the applicant but considers her current level of fatigue and accumulated stress over time to be a risk factor to fulfilling the leadership roles of the job. The NGO is however interested in employing the applicant but insists that she takes a three week vacation firstly. They negotiate to pay the applicant three weeks of a full time salary prior to hiring her.



# Preparation and Training

## Principle 3

**The agency ensures that all employees have appropriate pre-assignment preparation and training in managing stress.**

The preparation includes stress education and how to mitigate the effects of stress as well as a briefing on the expectable stressors likely to be encountered on the assignment.

### Indicators

1. All staff has received education about:
  - a. the expectable stressors of humanitarian work.
  - b. how to recognize the signs and effects of stress.
  - c. how to manage and cope with stress.
2. All staff have received updated briefing and training before a new assignment and when an assignment changes.
3. Supervisors and field managers are adequately trained and evaluated in stress management skills and capacities: They are able
  - a. to recognize signs of stress in their colleagues.
  - b. to monitor levels of staff stress as a routine activity.
  - c. to promote activities that help reduce stress.
  - d. to arrange support for individual staff as and when required.

### Comments

Training with respect to stress and emotional self care in the field has several elements. In general, it should include:

- a. education about the expectable stresses of humanitarian work (with as great a specificity as possible with respect to the particular assignment and with respect to risks faced by particular groups of staff);
- b. education about the mechanisms of stress response and about how to recognize signs of stress, burnout, critical incident stress, and vicarious traumatization in oneself and fellow workers;
- c. training in specific stress management techniques and coping skills, (e.g., relaxation techniques, anger management techniques, self care, the value of sharing experiences with co-worker, the usefulness and limitations/risks of defusing exercises, psychological first aid;
- d. education about the risks of common behaviours that are ineffective in coping with stress, such as heavy drinking;
- e. preparation for dealing with the emotional responses of people who have experienced traumatic events;
- f. provision of as much detailed, concrete information about actual conditions in the field as possible. Training in cultural and political awareness issues related to the area of deployment is also helpful.

Although not specifically addressing stress management, adequate preparation with respect to operational demands of a position, safety and security, self care (health care), and cross-cultural issues that may affect work all reduce stress on the worker.

Thus briefing and training should include:

- a. operational orientation and specific preparation for the operational requirements of the project (including development of skills needed for working with a team);
- b. training with respect to safety and security in the field (including training with regard to risks common to all humanitarian aid assignments and detailed specific information about the risks to be expected in the particular assignment and training in responding to those specific risks);
- c. training with respect to physical (health) self-care in the field (including provision of information about pre-deployment immunizations and malaria prophylaxis) and education about self-care in the field, such as hiv-aids prevention, infectious disease prevention, food and water safety, nutrition, physical exercise, rest and sleep);
- d. training in cultural and political awareness issues related to the area of deployment. The briefing and training provided should be specifically tailored both to the characteristics of the assignment and the specific needs and characteristics of the individual staff member.

Many managers are selected based on experience rather than managerial skills. Given the expectable stress of humanitarian work, it is recommended that agencies provide specific and culturally sensitive training in stress and stress management techniques for project leaders or managers.



# Monitoring

## Principle 4

**The agency ensures the monitoring of the response to stress of its staff on an ongoing basis.**

This can be done through informal observation by supervisors, periodic routine questioning by supervisors, routine administration to staff of self-report questionnaires, or periodic informal or formal group stress evaluation sessions.

### Indicators

1. Team managers are appraising staff members for signs of stress on a regular, routine basis.
2. Team managers are monitoring staff members closely for signs of stress during and after a critical incident or traumatic event.
3. Individual staff members are monitoring and, if appropriate, reporting signs of stress in themselves.
4. The agency has an explicit written policy that it will respond constructively (not punitively) to any revelations of stress.

### Comments

Most stress among humanitarian aid workers is the result of the ongoing, every day pressures of their work (e.g., separation from family, physically difficult living and working conditions, long and irregular hours, repeated exposure to danger, intra-team conflict). Poor administrative or managerial abilities on the part of team leaders and conflict within the team are also potentially major sources of stress. Stress may also result from non-job-related experiences (e.g., marital conflict, sickness or death in a staff member's family). Many aid workers develop a façade of toughness and believe that they shouldn't complain. Others may not recognize the signs of stress in themselves. It is the presence of the expectable stressful experiences rather than worker complaints that should trigger agency scrutiny of stress responses in its employees.

The purpose of monitoring stress is to provide a more caring and enabling environment for staff. At the same time, there is a potential for stress evaluation (and subsequent requirements for staff to cooperate with stress reduction programs) to be seen by staff as intrusive or as means to evaluate or control them. To ensure staff participation and cooperation with stress management programs, the agency must explicitly recognize this potential problem and must seek to design policies and procedures that protect staff members from misuse of the process.

Intra team conflict, scapegoating or harassment of individual team members, unusually high staff turnover, or reduced work effectiveness may reflect stress in individual team members or whole team dynamics. In such instances, it is recommended that systemic causes of stress be evaluated including the efficacy of team leadership and management by an external body.

### Case

A staff member in Uganda is observed by colleagues often to be working back late in the office and spending a lot of time at the computer. When told by colleagues that he is working too many hours, the staff member becomes quite upset and withdraws from social contact. Colleagues mention their concern to their team manager who then appraises the work load of the staff member and any other circumstances that may be causing any stress. The team manager also remembers to enquire how the staff member is now feeling about a serious event that had previously upset the staff

member three months prior and checks if this is still causing worry and painful reminders. The team manager also invites concerned colleagues to share their observations of their team member directly with him in a personal and positive way.

The team manager draws the staff member's attention to the agency's supportive policy on mitigating the effects of stress and suggests that a plan for reducing and managing the stressors be constructed together and reviewed in a week or two.

# Ongoing Support

## Principle 5

**The agency is providing training and support, on an ongoing basis, to help its staff deal with the daily stresses of humanitarian aid work.**

The agency hold managers, supervisors and team leaders accountable for creating a pro-active culture of stress mitigation. Team building, resolution of intra-team conflict, organizational practices that reduce stress, and encouragement of individual staff members' stress management activities are valued and given concrete support.

### Indicators

1. The agency provides ongoing training and support for staff with respect to safety and security, physical and emotional self-care.
2. Organizational and management practices are periodically reviewed with respect to their impact on staff stress, possibilities to mitigate stress and strengthening team cohesion.
3. Staff members are being encouraged to engage in good practices of self care and collegial support with respect to their health, to safety and security, and to stress reduction.

### Comments

Psychological support for staff is driven by the understanding that a high level of stressful experiences is inevitable in most humanitarian aid assignments and that, over time, most employees will feel the effects of this chronic stress. Providing pro-active support should be routine and should not be dependent on demands or concerns expressed by the staff members themselves or by observations that an individual is 'under stress'.

The agency ensures that field managers and supervisors are trained and qualified with respect to updating knowledge of safety and security practices and procedures; knowledge of practices promoting physical health in the field; knowledge of the potential impact of organizational culture, policies, and practices on staff stress; techniques of team building, including facilitating communication and conflict management; ability to recognize signs of stress, burnout, and vicarious traumatization; and skills in stress management and psychological first aid. Field managers are expected to be role models for staff under their supervision with respect to conducting themselves in ways that mitigate stress (e.g., taking appropriate work breaks, carrying out stress reduction procedures such as relaxation exercises). The agency provides periodic refresher training in these areas for field managers and supervisors.

Much evidence suggests that social supports are the most important protective factor supporting workers in dealing with stress. From a management perspective, team-building and managing of any conflict within the team are very high priorities. The agency also encourages and facilitates regular access to communication between staff members and their families or loved ones.

Many 'bureaucratic' aspects of work management practices can be sources of stress or can provide respite from stress. Although it is common for staff members to use the agency management style or the behaviour of a particular supervisor as a 'scapegoat', this does not lessen the need to carefully analyze and correct agency or managerial practices that may, in fact, augment stress. The agency should have clear, written policies that specify maximum shift time (save in emergencies), maximum work load, time for required rest and recreation, and requirements that staff use leave or vacation time. The agency should have a clear written policy that establishes procedures to implement these standards and hold field managers and supervisors accountable for implementing these standards.

At the same time, the staff member, too, has an obligation to behave in ways that reduce the likelihood of adverse effects of stress. These include following routine safety and security and health self care guidelines promulgated by the agency, participating in stress reduction activities (such as regulating their own work schedule, taking breaks, taking time off, participating in agency provided stress reduction activities, and engaging in personal stress reduction activities).



# Crisis Support

## Principle 6

**The agency provides staff with specific and culturally appropriate support in the wake of critical or traumatic incidents and other unusual and unexpected sources of severe stress.**

The agency ensures it is promptly informed about any extremely traumatic experience that happens to one or more staff members and is prepared to respond immediately.

### Indicators

1. All staff members are provided with explicit guidelines as to the kinds of critical or potentially stressful incidents that must be reported to higher management.
2. All managers and supervisors are trained in appropriate front line responses to traumatic incidents (for example, managing team response to traumatic incidents, monitoring of individual and team responses, and timely requests for back-up management support and specialised resources during the crisis period).
3. The agency has arranged for staff with specific training in psychological first aid to be available, on an 'as needed' basis, to consult with staff members after traumatic incidents or other sources of acute stress in staff.
4. The agency has standing arrangements with local, regional or international specialists during a crisis period to provide culturally relevant trauma assistance as required.

### Comments

Sources of extreme stress may include 'traumatic' or 'critical' incidents such as a serious motor vehicle accident, being kidnapped or taken hostage, experiencing a serious physical assault, being raped, having one's life threatened, or witnessing horrendous events happening to others. Other sources of unusual stress may include emergency evacuations, other unplanned terminations of assignments, or personally traumatic events (e.g., acute family crises such as an unexpected death in the family).

Experiencing or witnessing such events very commonly causes distressing responses in those who experience them. These responses include, but are not limited to Acute Stress Disorder, anxiety, somatic complaints, depression, pathological grief reactions, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, destructive or self destructive behaviors, and difficulties in interpersonal functioning (e.g., within the team). Even in the absence of direct exposure to horrific experiences, repeated exposure to accounts of the gruesome or terrifying experiences of others may cause secondary or vicarious traumatization.

Responses may be evident in the immediate wake of a critical event or only after some delay, and may vary in form and degree. They may affect all staff who experience them or only some staff. Even team members who did not directly experience the traumatic events may be affected. However, the 'culture' of humanitarian aid work often leads to aid workers denying or minimizing the distress they are experiencing or resisting efforts at providing them support. The response of the agency should be contingent on the occurrence of the event, not the expressed distress of team members.

Front line managers and supervisors necessarily provide the immediate responses to critical incidents, both for the staff members directly affected and for the team as a whole. This may include psychological first aid, psychoeducation about the effects of extreme stress, and assessing individual and team responses. However, helping others deal with traumatic stress, whether due to direct exposure to traumatic events or due to 'secondary' exposure, requires specific training and specialist knowledge. Neither field managers nor psychosocial workers normally have such training. The agency should employ or contract with specialists in such interventions to provide assistance when it is needed.

### Case

A national staff member is working in a tsunami affected area in Sri Lanka fifty kilometres from his home town which was also decimated by the tsunami. He needs the work because his family has no other form of income and has lost most of their possessions and livelihood. Colleagues have observed that he often shouts out in his sleep and easily forgets details of his tasks. His female team manager invites another male colleague (from a nearby region and of an allied community group) to talk with him to identify his support needs and to suggest that he consider some healing

support from a person or source that he would consider to be most helpful in order to help him reduce his levels of stress and grief reactions and the impact of his traumatic memories. Furthermore, she organizes a team meeting to discuss the impact of the day to day stresses on the personal wellbeing of all staff members and suggests to meet as a team in an ongoing way at least once a week. The team manager also invites a stress and trauma specialist in the local area to come in and deliver some psychosocial education about stress and trauma responses.

# End of Assignment Support

## Principle 7

**The agency provides practical, emotional and culturally appropriate support for staff at the end of an assignment or contract. This includes a personal stress review and an operational debriefing.**

Leaving an assignment, returning home or transferring to a new assignment can often be an underestimated and challenging experience and staff members need to be adequately prepared for it.

### Indicators

1. The agency has a program for assisting staff members who are completing an assignment to prepare for the stresses involved in leaving a project and returning home (or taking on another assignment).
2. All staff members are offered an exit operational debriefing at the end of their assignment or contract.
3. All staff members have access to a personal stress assessment and review at the end of their assignment or on an annual basis.
  - a. *the assessment is conducted by someone who is not associated with human resources management within the agency;*
  - b. *the agency agrees that the staff member's confidentiality is maintained with respect to stress assessments and reviews.*
4. The agency has standing arrangements to make psycho social services available for staff members in the wake of an evacuation or other premature or unexpected termination of a project or contract.
5. The agency has an explicit commitment to provide practical support to help employees make necessary arrangements associated with relocation after an evacuation or other premature or otherwise unexpected termination.

### Comments

It is easy to recognize the stresses of humanitarian aid work itself. The stresses associated with ending service and or returning home are more subtle, but can nevertheless be problematic. They include the pain of saying goodbye to people you have worked with closely, the concrete tasks associated with relocation, and the practical, interpersonal, and cultural difficulties in readjusting to life 'back home' or in a new assignment or new job.

Ending an assignment (whether in a planned or unplanned way), involves the need to attend to a myriad of practical tasks. These may include completing assignment reports, conducting hand-overs, finding new housing, finding a new job or identifying a new assignment, dealing with professional issues such as updating credentials and licenses, dealing with health issues and insurance, for international staff, coping with reverse culture shock and attending to home responsibilities. This can be a stressful process especially when feeling tired at the end of an assignment. Staff members should be encouraged and provided assistance in developing a re-entry plan.

An operational debriefing focuses on what the staff member observed, experienced and learned during their assignment, and how potentially the organization could benefit from this experience. Although an operational debriefing is not explicitly concerned with stress management, the experience of feeling listened to about field experience and reviewing agency practices can also reduce stress in the individual staff member.

By contrast, a more formal personal stress assessment and review focuses on how the worker has responded to the stresses they experienced during their period of service. It may explore what their experiences were, what their thoughts and feelings about these experiences are, and how they are dealing with those thoughts and feelings. It focuses especially on their current emotional state and any needs they may have for ongoing support or other interventions. It includes further education about the possible delayed impact of stressful experiences on an individual. Stress assessments and reviews should not be dependent on the staff member having experienced unusual stresses on the job.

In a stress assessment and review, an employee is asked to be open about personal feelings about their work. This can only be done in an atmosphere of confidentiality, in which the employee feels assured that their reactions will not affect their possible ongoing employment by the agency. They should always be conducted by someone appropriately trained.

Unplanned endings whether the result of evacuation, an unanticipated termination of a program, or a staff member's personal needs can present special problems. After an unplanned ending it is usually helpful for staff members to be given support in assessing their own needs and creating a personal management plan.

A staff member is faced with many challenges over the course of weeks or months following the end of their assignment (e.g. home relationships, social adjustments, vocational changes, delayed grief and fatigue). Follow up by the agency, with referrals to services and development of peer support networks may reduce the resulting stress.



# Post Assignment Support

## Principle 8

**The agency has clear written policies with respect to the ongoing support they will provide to staff members who have been adversely impacted by exposure to stress and trauma during their assignment.**

While laws in effect in many countries may provide a minimal level of protection or support for disabled workers, the agency itself evaluates what support it owes its staff.

### Indicators

1. The agency has a clear policy aimed at monitoring and supporting employees who have job stress-related disabilities such as burnout, severe stress, compassion fatigue or post trauma symptoms.
2. The agency has developed policies for employees who are unable to continue working for the agency due to job-related stress or injury.

This addresses issues such as continuation of salary and benefits and provision (or financing) of medical and/or psychosocial support services.

### Comments

Humanitarian aid agencies' activities place their workers at significant risk of physical injury, stress and fatigue or adverse psychological effects. On occasion, these may make continued work in the field problematic. National laws vary in the requirements they place on employers in such circumstances and in the practical supports (e.g., income, health care) provided by the government itself. Regardless of national law, humanitarian aid agencies make all efforts to ensure that staff members who are physically or psychologically disabled as a result of their work for the agency can continue in employment. This may require assigning the staff member to a position in which they are less exposed to significant stress or trauma, for whatever time is required for recovery.

Humanitarian aid agencies duty to provide humanitarian aid to those in need extends to their own workers. In some cases, the extent of disability may make it impossible to offer ongoing employment. Agencies may provide disability insurance coverage to fill in gaps in governmental programs of support and insist that health insurance coverage for their staff includes adequate coverage for mental health services and includes provisions for the employee to maintain coverage if they are no longer employed by the agency.

Because of the many different national laws applying to agency staffing various countries, the agency gives especially careful attention to the impact of these issues with regard to national staff.

### Case

A manager and his team are evacuated from Colombia after one of many violent outbursts in the town where they are working and living. Several of their national staff colleagues were seriously injured in the rioting and they were devastated to leave them behind. The manager himself was hit by a stray stone on the back of her shoulder which could easily have hit her head. The agency is making arrangements to leave the country for the medium term. The manager is surprised by his very emotional reaction to this event and cannot stop thinking of the best way to return to this town to resume working with 'his' local staff. Sometimes in the middle of the day, he imagines the distressed faces of the local staff looking up at the helicopter as they are evacuating. The agency at headquarters arranges for the

manager and his team to meet with a mental health and trauma specialist who also has knowledge of working in a humanitarian context. The agency wants to find out what happened to the town after the evacuation and tries to make contact with the national staff that remained there. The manager gets paid leave for a three month period and provides ongoing confidential counseling. They also arrange his full medical check-up. They offer the same package to the team. The HR manager regularly makes contact with this manager to check how things are going and a more comprehensive review of his health is arranged at the end of the three month period. The situation for the national staff members remains very insecure and the agency tries to identify ways to extend support to them as well.

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Antares Foundation: advice • support • training

General information on the Antares Foundation:

## Mission statement

The mission of the Antares Foundation is to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance and overseas development through advice, training and support.

## Antares' areas of work

### Training & Support

- Assistance with designing staff care and psychosocial support systems within humanitarian organizations for international and national staff.
- Stress & security briefing and debriefing for field staff.
- Training and coaching in stress management to national and international NGOs.
- Direct psychosocial support after critical incidents and prolonged severe stress in teams.

### Management support

To the managers of humanitarian organizations the Antares Foundation offers project-analysis and evaluation, tools for project management and direct coaching and support in the field.

### Consultancies

- Assessments of management systems, HRM systems, psychosocial support systems or any particular issues related to project management.
- Project evaluations: management and staff care issues and of mental health projects.

### Conferences

Antares organises international conferences or workshops in Amsterdam on a yearly basis on Managing Stress of the Humanitarian Aid Worker.

### Research & Publications

The Antares Foundation cooperates with academic institutions in research projects and in developing psychosocial systems and professional management tools.

### Advocacy & Lobby

To raise awareness of the urgency of her mission the Antares Foundation develops guidelines, models, education modules and raises awareness amongst NGOs and donors.

For further information, please look at our website [www.antaresfoundation.org](http://www.antaresfoundation.org) or contact the Antares Foundation, see address below.

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