

MANAGING STRESS IN HUMANITARIAN WORKERS GUIDELINES FOR GOOD PRACTICE¹

Guiding Principle: Managing staff stress is good management practice.

Managing stress in staff of humanitarian aid organizations is an essential ingredient in enabling the organization to fulfill its field objectives, as well as necessary to protect the well being of the individual staff members themselves.

WHY IS THIS 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 behaviors 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. From the standpoint of the humanitarian aid agency itself, staff stress and burnout may impede recruitment and retention of qualified staff, increase health care costs, 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 own employees. 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 positive responsibility, growing out of and consistent with their overall humanitarian mission, to enhance growth and development amongst staff. 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 guidelines below are intended to ensure that the agency acts in ways that minimize the risk of adverse consequences for its employees. They are intended to apply to both international and national staff, recognizing that adjustments may be necessary to take into account the unique needs and characteristics of each group.

Principle 1: The agency has a written strategic plan that accepts overall organizational responsibility for reducing the sources of stress, acting to prevent or mitigate the effects of stress, and responding to the unavoidable effects of stress.

The plan reflects the agency’s understanding of the impact of staff stress on their employees and on the agency’s ability to serve their target population, and relates staff support to the overall organizational philosophy. 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 stress in employees. The plan includes measurable outcome indicators with regard to staff well-being.

INDICATORS

1. The agency has an explicit, written specific risk assessment for each individual project, including assessment of the overall level of risk, of specific safety and security risks, and of health and mental health (emotional) risks to staff, and develops a specific strategy for risk reduction for that project.
2. The agency has written plans for responding to unexpected circumstances (such as forced evacuations or “critical incidents”) as well as to the normally expected stresses of humanitarian work.
3. The agency warns and educates potential workers (both international and national) about the risks of humanitarian work (including the risks of humanitarian aid work in general, the specific risks of the project(s) they will be assigned to, and any specific risks they may face as a result of their gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, or other distinguishing individual characteristics).
4. The agency acts to protect staff from and lessen these risks (insofar as it is possible) and it seeks to mitigate those adverse effects that do occur.
5. The agency commits itself to act in ways that reduce the stress on staff that stems from inadequate or dysfunctional organizational policies and practices.
 - a. It has clear and firm policies forbidding discrimination against staff based on sex, race, nationality or sexual orientation, and forbidding sexual, racial, and emotional harassment of any individual or group of staff members.
 - b. It creates personnel policies that reduce potential organizational and “bureaucratic” sources of stress and enhance staff resilience.
 - c. It trains and evaluates managers and team leaders to ensure that they have the requisite competencies to lead teams in complex humanitarian aid environments
 - d. It creates an expectation that all staff do their best to develop and use personal stress management skills and they create opportunities and support for staff in doing so.
 - e. It encourages and provides support for staff in developing their own skills, competencies, expertise, and knowledge and in ways that will increase the likelihood of the agency achieving its field-based objectives.
6. The agency explicitly recognizes that the needs of national staff and expatriate staff are not identical and tailors its specific policies and programs to respond to the distinct needs of each of these groups.

7. The agency recognizes that office staff and other staff who are in frequent contact with field workers also experience stress, and that the stresses experienced by these groups are not identical to those of field staff. It designs specific policies and programs to respond to the specific needs of each of these separate groups.
8. Agency policies and practices with respect to reducing and mitigating the effects of stress on their employees include mechanisms of accountability to ensure that they are carried out and include mechanisms for on-going re-assessment of policies and practices.]
9. The agency recognizes that, in accepting employment and/or an assignment, the employee accepts a commitment to the same goal of stress prevention, mitigation, and response as the agency. The agency encourages the individual staff member to hold the agency to its commitment, without fear of reprisal or discrimination and in complementary fashion, in accepting employment the individual accepts a commitment to comply with agency procedures, rules, and regulations aimed at reducing stress.

COMMENTS

It would be easy to imagine that stress is something that happens to staff in the field solely as a result of their field experiences. In reality, every aspect of an agency's functioning, including hiring and assignment procedures, contract terms, benefits, career development policies and opportunities, procedures for decision making, polices regarding communication and information sharing within the organization, provisions and procedures for supervision and support of field workers, rules and regulations concerning vacations, policies regarding work hours, policies regarding access to communications with home, grievance procedures, and the "culture" of the organization itself, has an impact on the stress experienced by staff.

As a result, stress management is not something that can be separated out from the rest of organizational functioning. It can not be assigned solely to a particular office or individual to manage. It can not be limited to actions the agency takes solely at times of unusual stress. It must, instead, be imbued throughout the organization, taken into account in designing a wide array or organizational practices, and constantly reevaluated. In the same vein, evaluating an employee for the effects of stress is not a one time affair, engaged in after an unusual event or solely at the end of an assignment. Monitoring of stress levels in individuals and acting to prevent or reduce adverse effects of stress is an ongoing process throughout the staff member's time of association with the agency.

Principle 2: The agency systematically screens or assesses the suitability of staff members before hiring and assignment.

Assessment is an ongoing process, focusing on factors possibly affecting the likelihood of adverse or maladaptive responses to the stresses of humanitarian work. It begins before a decision is made to hire a staff member, continues throughout the briefing and training period for new staff members, and is renewed whenever an employee is to be offered a new position or a new assignment.

INDICATORS

1. The agency seeks to develop an evidence-based understanding of the minimum health and mental health requirements for high risk and high stress assignments, based on its own experience and that of similar agencies
2. The agency screens or assesses prospective staff and staff seeking new assignments with respect to factors possibly affecting the likelihood of adverse or maladaptive response to the risks and stresses of humanitarian aid work.
3. The agency recognizes that human resources personnel without specific training are unlikely to be effective in carrying out a screening or assessment at an acceptable level and consequently uses appropriately educated and trained interviewers for this purpose.
4. The agency holds the individual seeking employment or assignment 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.

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) and with respect to factors relevant to creating an effective team. Assessment includes 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. how past difficulties in personal and professional life have been dealt with.
- e. 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 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 mental or physical characteristics, then inquiry into these characteristics and hiring or assignment decisions based on these standards is generally considered ethically and legally legitimate.

In carrying out such screenings and assessments, the agency recognizes that identifying in an individual risk factors for adverse responses to expectable stressors of humanitarian aid work is not necessarily a bar to employment but rather a guide to assignment, training, and other means of matching an individual's capacities to the demands to be made upon them.

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.

Principle 3: The agency ensures that all employees have appropriate pre-employment briefings and training.

The briefing/training includes operational orientation, training with respect to safety and security, training with respect to physical (health) self care, training in cultural and political awareness issues related to the area of deployment, and training with respect to stress and emotional self care.

INDICATORS

1. The agency ensures that all staff (including office workers and staff who will be in frequent contact with field staff and including both national and international staff) receive an adequate pre-deployment briefing and training.
2. The agency provides a new briefing and training to ongoing staff when their assignment changes appreciably.
3. The agency trains its supervisors and field managers to recognize stress in their subordinates, to engage in team building activities that help mitigate stress in staff, to respond appropriately to stress in their staff, and to call for assistance in times of unusual stress.

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 sub-categories 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,” the risk of using heavy alcohol consumption as a way of coping); (d) preparation for dealing with the emotional responses of survivors of traumatic events; and (e) 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.

Understanding of the best ways to respond to stress is a rapidly evolving field. The agency must be committed to a continued process of updating its knowledge and understanding of stress and of procedures for preventing, mitigating, or responding to stress and to incorporating this knowledge in its training programs and support programs.

Although not specifically addressing stress, 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); and (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.

Principle 4: The agency monitors the response to stress of its field 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. The agency assesses staff members for signs of stress on a regular, routine basis as well as in the wake of crises. The manager, supervisor, or other staff member responsible for such assessment documents that it has been carried out.
2. The agency holds individual staff members responsible for reporting signs of stress in themselves and has an explicit written policy of not responding punitively to any such revelations.

COMMENTS

Stress is the result of the ongoing, every day pressures of humanitarian aid work (e.g., separation from family, physically difficult living and working conditions, long and irregular hours, repeated exposure to danger). It 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.

Principle 5: The agency provides support, on an ongoing basis, to help its staff deal with the expectable stresses of humanitarian aid work.

The agency hold supervisors and field managers responsible (and accountable) for creating a "culture of responsiveness" around safety, health, and mental health issues at the local (project) level. 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 has written protocols in place regarding ongoing (in the field) training and policies for support of staff with respect to safety and security, physical self-care, and emotional self care.
2. The agency makes stress assessment and management part of the formal job description of supervisors and field managers.
3. The agency periodically reviews its organizational practices with respect to their impact on staff stress and seek to identify changes they can make in policies and procedures to lessen the stress on staff that may result from these patterns of organizational functioning.
4. The agency makes clear to employees that it expects them to engage in good practices of self care 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 such 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 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 unrestricted 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 as a “scapegoat,” this does not lessen the need to carefully analyze and correct agency 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 establishing 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).

Principle 6: The agency provides staff with specific support (psychological first aid, psychoeducation, evaluation, and referral to follow up support and care when appropriate) in the wake of critical incidents and other unusual and unexpected sources of stress.

The agency has explicit standing plans that ensure it is promptly informed about any extremely traumatic experience that happens to one or more members of an aid team. and is and is able to respond rapidly.

INDICATORS

1. The agency provides field managers and supervisors, as well as staff, with explicit guidelines as to the kinds of “critical incidents” that should be reported to the agency headquarters.
2. The agency makes psychosocial staff with specific training in psychological first aid available, on an “as needed” basis, to consult with staff members after critical incidents or other sources of acute stress in staff.
3. The agency has standing arrangements with specialists in such interventions to provide assistance when it is needed.

COMMENTS

Sources of extreme stress may include “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 (including other team members). 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 (though not universally) causes distressing responses in those who experience them. These responses include, but are not limited to “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder,” “acute Stress Disorder,” depression, anxiety, pathological grief reactions, destructive or self destructive behaviors, somatic complaints, 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 (e.g., aid recipients) 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. 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.

Helping others deal with traumatic stress, whether due to direct exposure to traumatic events or due to “secondary” exposure, requires specific training. 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.

Principle 7: The agency provides all staff members with both a personal stress assessment and review and an operational debriefing at the end of their assignment or at the end of their contract.

The stress assessment and review is not carried out by human resource management personnel who may play a role in determining the future of the staff member within the organization.

INDICATORS

1. The agency requires that all staff, both international and national, receive an exit personal stress assessment and review, conducted by someone not associated with human resources management, when they end their service on a project (or, in the case of long-term staff, on an annual basis).
2. The agency agrees that the staff member’s confidentiality is maintained with respect to stress assessments and reviews.

COMMENTS

A 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 impact of stressful experiences on an individual, including the possibility, however unlikely, of late-appearing and/or long-lasting emotional effects of work in the field. It explicitly addresses any need for further interventions to reduce adverse responses to stress. It is not aimed at specific organizational change except insofar as it suggests ways the organization can improve its stress management efforts and its understanding of the expectable stresses of humanitarian aid work.

By contrast, an operational debriefing focuses on what the staff member did during their assignment, what happened to them, what the agency and they personally did well or poorly, and what can be done to enhance agency or individual performance. It includes an attempt to define the individual worker’s needs with respect to future training and with respect to concrete needs associated with returning home or accepting a new assignment. Although an operational debriefing is not explicitly concerned with stress management, the experience of feeling listened to about field experience and agency practices and of the agency’s demonstration of support for the employee’s concrete needs during the re-entry transition can also reduce (or, if done poorly, increase) stress in the individual staff member.

Stress assessments and reviews may be useful ways of evaluating and addressing adverse responses to stress at any time during a worker’s service with the agency. They should be routinely required of employees at the end of an assignment and, for staff on long term assignments, at least once a year. They should not be dependent on the staff member’s having experienced unusual stresses on the job. They should never consist of a one-off intervention in which the staff member simply ventilates about their feelings.

Rather they should focus on evaluating the stress level experienced by the worker as a result of their work and on designing appropriate follow-up interventions if needed.

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. For this reason, they should always be conducted by someone who is not part of human resources management, although they may be carried out by someone in the regular employ of the agency. In any case, the person conducting the stress assessment should have training in carrying out such reviews. This is not a matter of concern with respect to the operational debriefing.

Principle 8: The agency provides both practical and emotional support for staff at the end of an assignment or contract.

The agency helps staff members prepare for their return home or transfer to a new assignment. Especially in cases of unexpected termination of a project (e.g., emergency evacuation), the agency helps the staff member deal with the logistics of relocation as well as the potential emotional consequences.

INDICATORS

1. The agency has standing arrangements to make psychosocial staff with specific training in psychological first aid available to consult with staff members in the wake of an evacuation or other premature or unexpected termination of a project or contract.
2. The agency has an explicit commitment to provide support to help employees make necessary practical arrangements associated with relocation after an evacuation or other premature or otherwise unexpected termination.
3. The agency has a program for assisting staff who are completing an assignment or contract to prepare for the stresses involved in leaving a project and returning home (or taking on another assignment or contract).
4. The agency systematically follows up staff with respect to on-going adjustment or emotional or family problems several weeks after the end of their assignment or contract or after their return home and provides services or referrals to services if needed.
5. The agency provides an opportunity, at the end of a project, for office and other support and supervisory staff to be involved in evaluating the project, including exploring lessons learned and feelings aroused

6. The agency provides adequate notice to staff members in the event a project or the staff member's employment with a project will be terminated other than for emergency reasons.
7. The agency eliminates any conditions of service/contract that financially penalize or otherwise negatively impact employees who leave at their own initiative.

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.

Survival in the field depends, both practically and emotionally, on building strong emotional connections to other team members, to others in the aid community, and, often, to recipients. No matter the intentions of "staying in touch," the worker has to say what may be final goodbyes, and grieve the loss or transformation of intense relationships. Staff should be encouraged to spend time with those they were close to before leaving. After an unplanned ending it is usually helpful for staff members who will not be returning to the site of their previous assignment to be asked to spend a few transitional days in a "neutral" place, where they can think and reflect and plan, rather than abruptly returning "home" or moving on to a new assignment. Unplanned endings also dramatically increase the stress of dealing with practicalities, such as transferring belongings back home. The agency should provide assistance with respect to such needs.

Ending an assignment, whether in a planned or unplanned way, involves a myriad of practical tasks, many of which may be stressful. They may include finding a 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, and dealing with "reverse culture shock." Employees should be encouraged and provided assistance in developing a "re-entry plan" (e.g., explicit plans for returning to work and for following up on medical or psychological needs).

Some of the most difficult, yet unexpected stresses may occur when a staff member who has been separated from his or her family returns home. While the staff member is on assignment, he or she is likely to have changed and grown. Family and friends back home may have changed and grown, as well. Children have gotten older and the experiences and memories of family members and friends have diverged from those of the returned staff member. Support networks from the past may have weakened with the passage of time. The expectations of a returned staff member and their family members may be out of synchrony. Staff should be provided information about issues that may emerge when they are reunited with their family, as a result of the divergence of their experience and that of their family during their time in the field. Family members of staff should be offered general information about what to expect when a family member returns after a prolonged assignment.

Many difficulties, both practical (e.g., difficulties finding a new position), interpersonal (e.g., marital conflict), and psychological (e.g., delayed grief reactions, difficulty readjusting to the home culture, or delayed post-traumatic reactions), emerge over the course of several weeks or months following the end of a staff member's assignment or contract. Follow up by the agency, with offers of services or referrals to services if needed, and development of peer support networks may reduce the resulting stress.

The ending of a project creates strong feelings in office and support staff and others in the agency who have had regular contact with the project, as well. They, too, need an opportunity to be involved in evaluating the project, including exploring lessons learned and feelings aroused.

Principle 9: 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 through their work.

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 against dismissal of employees who have job stress-related disabilities such as “burnout,” depression, or PTSD.
2. The agency has policies addressing issues such as continuation of salary and benefits and provision (or financing) of medical and/or psychological services for employees who are unable to continue working for the agency due to job-related stress or injury.

COMMENTS

Humanitarian aid agencies’ activities place their workers at significant risk of physical injury 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.

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