

Social support, institutional support : a key element in the prevention of burn out and PTSD.

Humanitarian Conference Webster

## **SOCIAL SUPPORT, INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT: A KEY ELEMENT IN THE PREVENTION OF BURNOUT AND PTSD**

**By Christine Meinhardt**

### **Introduction**

I would like to give you a brief overview on a subject of primary importance when speaking about stress in humanitarian workers. I will be discussing the central role of support, social support in general and institutional support (the support given by a humanitarian organisation to its staff) in particular.

For the past eleven years I have worked as a stress counsellor for the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). During this time I have briefed and debriefed approximately 1,000 Red Cross delegates, thus gaining vast insights on ways and means to prevent burn out and PTSD.

A document that sets the essential framework for institutional support in humanitarian organisations is “The Guidelines for Good Practice”, by the Antares Foundation:

“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 organisations bear a dual responsibility. They must effectively carry out their primary mission and, at the same time, they must protect the well being 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

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enhancing expertise which will increase the likelihood of the agency achieving its field-based objectives.

Although stress is inherent 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.(...)"<sup>1</sup>

### **The Psychological support program for Federation staff of IFRC**

The Psychological support program (PSP) for delegates of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) was set up in 1993 at the time of the Great Lakes crisis when delegates came home traumatized after having witnessed the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda. Debriefing sessions were organized with a psychotherapist consultant based in Geneva. The use of an external consultant provided, for both the Secretariat and the delegates, the advantage of full confidentiality. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) chose to set up a similar but fully integrated structure within their own organisation.<sup>2</sup> Over the years, the PSP has gained momentum and currently effectively contributes to mitigating the harmful effect of stress on Federation delegates in the field. Two stress consultants have been doing stress briefings and debriefings, critical incident debriefings, field visits and support by e-mail and telephone in order to help delegates cope with stress. They have been collaborating closely with HR to help them address recurring stress issues in the field as well as those coming from within the organisation.

Presently, this program is undergoing decentralization. The Geneva PSP team together with HR is in the process of recruiting and training stress counsellors in the seven zones that have been created in order to implement an efficient decentralization.

The IFRC has made organisational staff support a management priority. The enhancement of the Psychological support program for Federation staff has enabled IFRC to fulfill its field objectives and protect the well-being of their staff.

#### **The aim of the PSP :**

Since its creation, the aim of the PSP has been to maintain a well functioning support system that contributes to "helping the helpers" deal with the stress that is inherent in humanitarian work and to prevent burn out and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

### **Prevention of burn out and PTSD**

In such a short presentation it is not possible to give an in-depth explanation of the nature of burn out and PTSD and all the theories that are behind the approaches to prevention. I will therefore limit myself to expounding some very basic ideas which I personally regard as essential elements of any reflection on staff well being .

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<sup>1</sup> Managing stress in humanitarian workers, Guidelines for good practice, Antares Foundation, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Revel Jean-Pierre, Psychological Support Program for delegates, An historical review, (unpublished) 1998

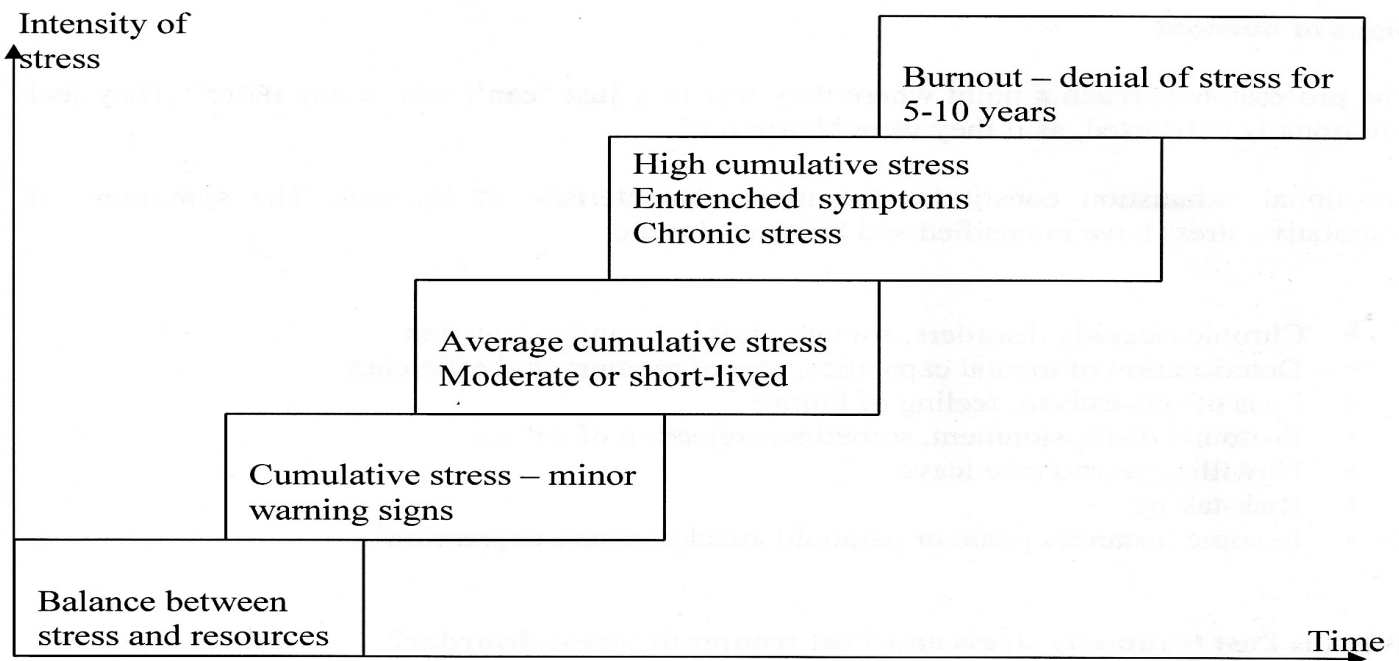
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### What is burn out?

Burn out is the consequence of chronic cumulative stress which, over time, exhausts one's physical and mental coping mechanisms.

#### Stair step effect of cumulative stress

Cumulative stress is like stair steps. People who manage their stress well have learned to walk back down the first couple of stair steps if they realize they have gone a bit too high. If they fail to take appropriate action, they continue to climb stairs. The higher they get, the harder it is to restore the balance. They eventually find themselves in a chronically stressful situation where their professional life is constantly encroaching upon their private life. Once they reach this stage, they have more and more trouble relaxing.



Drawing inspired by Mitchell J. and Brady G.<sup>3</sup>

### How does burnout happen?

As we mention in the brochure which we hand out to delegates during their stress briefing session, one does not suddenly burn out. The person undergoes a process marked by physical, emotional and behavioural indicators that could have been identified and addressed at an early

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Mitchell, Grady Bray, Emergency Services Stress, Prentice-Hall Inc. ,1990

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stage. Research demonstrates that ignoring, denying or neglecting warning signs over the years gradually induces a state of burnout.<sup>4</sup>

### **Signs of high cumulative stress (early stages of burnout)**

High cumulative stress can manifest itself in different ways:

- Difficulty or inability to recharge one's batteries and restore a mental and physical balance. More and more intense or chronic signs of stress develop (e.g. chronic sleeping disorders, mood swings or chronic depressive states).
- Serious health problems (e.g. heart attack, thyroid problems, high blood pressure, etc.)
- Lasting loss of motivation and collapse of belief systems: feeling of emptiness, doubt in religious beliefs, search for magical solutions, gradual loss of self-esteem, cynicism about life.

### **Signs of burnout**

The professionals reach a point where they feel they just “can't take it any more”. They feel emotionally exhausted, as if they were “burnt out”.

Emotional exhaustion constitutes the main characteristic of burnout. 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, feeling of failure
- Profound disillusionment, sometimes rejection of values
- Unwillingness to take leave
- Risk-taking
- In some instances panic or paranoid attacks, severe depression<sup>5</sup>.

### **What is Post traumatic stress and Post traumatic stress disorder?**

Traumatic stress is sudden and unexpected. It is caused by confrontation with violence, death, natural disasters, war etc. In a certain number of cases, it may further develop into Post traumatic stress disorder. PTSD is like a wound that does not heal. DSM IV describes all symptoms in detail.<sup>6</sup>

Humanitarian workers can be primary victims of traumatic stress, or secondary victims when they have witnessed traumatizing events or listened to victims of traumatizing events.

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<sup>4</sup> Managing stress in the field, IFRC, Geneva, 2004/2009

<sup>5</sup> Managing stress in the field, IFRC, Geneva, 2004/2009

<sup>6</sup> DSM IV, American Psychiatric Association, Washington DC, 2000

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Burn out and PTSD seem very distinct concepts, however in reality, they are not as clear cut as it seems. Such was the case of a Red Cross delegate who had dealt surprisingly well with the stress of war in Bosnia, the suicide of two colleagues and the death of several staff members. Although he appeared to have overcome all these traumatic experiences, upon return to the same country a few years later and having to deal with somewhat frustrating circumstances, he experienced a massive burnout. This relatively “minor” situation had been “the last straw that broke the camel’s back”. All the traumatic situations he had experienced in the past, just popped up like “Jack in the box”.

### **Upsetting emotional experiences, small “t” trauma can be provoked by ethical stress**

We differentiate between “T” trauma, as defined in DSM IV and small “t” trauma. Small “t” traumas are upsetting emotional experiences that can trigger symptoms of traumatic stress. In the field “ethical” stress can be at the root of such deep emotional upsets.

### **What is it “ethical stress”?**

“Ethical stress” is any experience that challenges a person’s values, ideals, meaning of life or vision of humanity. These can include things such as violence, cruelty, corruption, unethical behaviour in their own organisation, bribing, backstabbing, mobbing, unfair dismissal, etc.

Humanitarian workers are often quite idealistic people. Unethical behaviour in their own organisation such as careless spending, arbitrary decisions that reveal too much complacency towards corruption or dishonest consultants, bribing and backstabbing in their own office can come as a huge shock. Such experiences can cause cumulative stress and burn out and / or induce a delegate to leave the organisation.

A woman I had in therapy was unfairly removed from her place of assignment due to “political” decisions. She had many symptoms that people experience after trauma. She just couldn’t believe that her beloved organisation could have done this to her after so many years of tireless commitment.

Such experiences can lead to the disillusionment, cynicism or depression that often precedes burn out. I could quote a great number of sentiments verbalized in debriefing sessions with humanitarian workers from a variety of organisations, that express this sort of dilemma, hopelessness or identity crisis:

“I feel betrayed, let down.”

“I feel like a priest who lost his religion.”

“You come here because you care and you can only survive if you don’t care.”

“When the ethics of an organisation are disregarded by the very guardians, it is disillusioning”.

### **One important key to prevention is support - why?**

Social and institutional support make a person feel appreciated and cared for, and therefore contributes to making their work meaningful. “Others care. What I’m doing counts for them”.

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This is a deep human need, certainly as universal and almost as vital as the need for food, sleep and shelter.

### **Social support**

Family support is the primary source of support for most humanitarian workers comes. This is evidenced by the amount of time (and sometimes money) spent on the telephone, e-mail or Skype communicating with family back home. Fortunate is the humanitarian worker who has an “accompanied” or family posting. Coming back to a happy home after a stressful day to play with one’s children and talk to one’s spouse does magic. This premise rests on the condition that the family has been able to cope successfully with the stress of expatriation. Organisations need to concern themselves with taking care of family needs as well since family issues rank among the top reasons for assignment failure.<sup>7</sup> Family and employee well being is a factor in the strength of an organisation.

Socializing in the field it is not always easy. Expatriates tend to overwork and many neglect their social life. Strict security rules, curfew or prohibition to drive at night time do not favour social contacts.

Peer support is essential and a great number of studies clearly show that peer support reduces the risk of burn out when the team is under great stress. Peer support gives the opportunity to share positive experiences, to create a positive organisational climate, to experience a sense of belonging and to develop a collective efficiency.

As cumulative stress very often impacts on team dynamics by fostering clique formation, tensions, scapegoating etc., organisations need to support teams, e.g. by implementing a system of mediation when tensions and conflicts emerge.

### **Institutional support**

Support by management: A good manager contributes to reducing stress in a team. A manager who is a good leader, who communicates clearly and gives attention to the needs of his staff creates an environment that enhances performance and job satisfaction even in times of great stress. But managers are usually the ones that are exposed to the greatest pressure, and they can easily slide into burn out if not sufficiently supported by their own line managers.

Security: A good security system is a must in today’s world where humanitarian workers can be targeted by bandits or terrorists that do not respect emblems like the Red Cross or Red Crescent. In my psychotherapy practice I have seen humanitarian workers who had been attacked because in their organization there were no security systems or procedures in place. The Red Cross implements very strict security rules that may seem exaggerated to outsiders, but help keep the number of casualties very low.

Psychological support: Different organisations have established different systems of psychological support, but they all share the method of offering a confidential space with a peer or professional who listens and cares. Psychological support sessions give the worker the opportunity to:

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<sup>7</sup> Gmac (Brookfield) Global Relocation Services, Survey report, 2004

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- defuse painful emotions
- step back and reflect
- find new resources
- get advice
- enhance one's stress management skills.

In IFRC there is a personal relationship between the stress counsellor and the delegate. Each delegate can contact his/her stress counsellor by e-mail in case of heavy stress and after a security incident if he/she wishes to do so. If the stress counsellor is informed by the security unit or the health officer that a security incident or evacuation has occurred, the stress counsellor calls the concerned delegate(s) as soon as possible.

### **Why is support so important in burn out prevention?**

In observing professionals who have progressed into burnout, one can notice that there is always an interaction between systemic/institutional causes and personal causes.

#### Systemic causes

- Lack of support and recognition
- Insecure environment, job insecurity
- Constant pressure, unclear roles
- Lack of control over the situation
- Unwanted organisational changes
- Competitiveness in the workplace

#### Personal causes

- "Workaholic" tendency
- Difficulty saying, "no"
- Not being used to taking care of oneself
- High degree of perfectionism, idealism, or over commitment
- Ongoing life stress

The major systemic cause of burn out is lack of support, understanding and recognition. This has a particularly strong impact on people who are idealistic, overcommitted, sometimes lacking self confidence, who do not fix limits and/or have a strong need of recognition. As one delegate put it "I lost my motivation. We need to hear: Thank you, well done!"

According to Siegrist, burn out happens when there is an imbalance between effort and reward. The reward for humanitarian workers is less a question of salary or professional status, but more often in knowing "I can make a difference". If results are difficult to achieve or progress is slow, or if support and recognition are insufficient, enthusiasm will turn into disillusionment and demotivation.<sup>8</sup>

### **Why is support so important for PTSD prevention?**

The literature points to the absence of good social support after the traumatogenic event as being one of the predisposing factors for PTSD. Interactions between an individual and

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<sup>8</sup>Siegrist J. Adverse health effects of high-effort/low-reward conditions. Journal of Occupational Health Psychology 1996;1:27-41.

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his/her environment/ community play a significant role in determining whether a person is able to cope with the potentially traumatizing experiences that set the stage for the development of PTSD.

During the debriefing session of a humanitarian worker who had been attacked in an African market, I asked, “what was the worst moment?” She replied: “during the attack or after?” “Why after?” “ Well, afterwards none of my colleagues called me to ask me how I was. That was the worst!”.

This is not surprising, because after a traumatizing event one feels particularly vulnerable or helpless, and in dire need of human bonding. In our brochure “ Managing stress in the field” we recommend to all teams that they give support as a “standard procedure” after a traumatic experience.

In a study on traumatic attachment and the psychopathogenesis of posttraumatic stress disorder A. Schore remarks that “feelings of hopelessness arise when individuals are unable to share and connect with others in a process of constant mutual interest.”<sup>9</sup>(Schore 2002)  
Dr. Ros Thomas, underlines in her research “From stress to sense of coherence”, “It seems that when support is perceived, humanitarian workers may be free to self-disclose, to defuse stressful experiences and adopt attitudes that are functional for coping.” (Thomas 2007)

As one would say in psychotherapy, it is important to “hold” the humanitarian worker who is holding the most vulnerable.

Recent studies in neurobiology confirm that human bonds facilitate the reduction of acute stress reactions (hyper-arousal of the sympathetic system) and induce the capacity to relax and rest. When we feel safe with a person, our body produces oxytocine<sup>10</sup>(the hormone secreted by mother and baby during breastfeeding), which reduces anxiety, gives comfort and soothes the symptoms of traumatic stress.

Dr. David Serrvan-Schreiber<sup>11</sup> insists on the importance of the connection between heart and emotional brain. The slowing down of the heart reduces hyper-arousal, and the capacity to feel gratitude, joy and love in one’s interaction with others facilitates a return to the parasympathetic system.

### **The lonely life of an expatriate – don’t let me down....!**

But what if you are somewhere out there living the lonely life of an expatriate? No family, no friends, no community....?

That’s exactly the situation where support makes the difference:“ Even though I was thousands of kilometres away from my nearest expat colleague, I never felt alone or abandoned. I knew that support was there if needed it and if the phone worked.”

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<sup>9</sup> Schore A.N. Dysregulation of the right brain: A fundamental mechanism of traumatic attachment and the psychopathogenesis of posttraumatic stress disorder. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 36, 9-30

<sup>10</sup> Düsing Rainer, Oxytocin, Cortisol&Stress- Kognitive Funktionen des Selbst Diplomarbeit im Fachbereich der Humanwissenschaften/ Psychologie der Universität Osnabrück 2006

<sup>11</sup> Servan Schreiber David M.D.PH.D., The instinct to heal: curing stress, anxiety and depression without drugs and without talk therapy, Rodale press, 2004



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As Dr. Ros Thomas so rightly puts it, “many humanitarian workers concentrate on organisational life and fail to develop relationships outside the organisation: long stays away from home undermine the opportunity to forge elements of trust and intimacy of social networks. And if, for whatever reason, the organisation fails them, their stripped down identity results in a vulnerable social support from which they can draw resources to deal with stressors”.<sup>12</sup>

In the PSP our stress counselling has always been resource oriented. It is my conviction that one can only use one’s inner resources fully if external resources are present. Support enhances resilience, motivation and job satisfaction.



### The cost of institutional support

Humanitarian organisations can only be successful through the actions of people. People are the asset of humanitarian organisations. They cannot financially afford to let staff become unwell. Even though institutional support implies a certain cost, institutional neglect has a severe impact on staff in terms of physical and mental health, job satisfaction and job efficiency. Furthermore, institutional neglect pushes people to leave the organisation or in some rare cases to sue the organisation. All this leads to high financial losses for the organisation; money that will never reach the beneficiaries.

### Conclusion

Mission stress can affect a person deeply. In the many years I have worked with my colleague Karine Bonvin for the PSP we have seen delegates coming back radiating with joy and empowered: “ Now I know I can endure anything! ”But we have also met some delegates whose self esteem and belief in humanity had been so deeply shattered that they needed several years to readjust and enjoy life again.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Roslyn Dr. Phil From stress to sense of coherence :Psychological Experiences of Humanitarian Workers in complex Humanitarian Emergencies. International Development Centre, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, 2008

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The purpose of this presentation was to demonstrate the vital importance of support in burn out and PTSD prevention. In trying to understand the causes of burn out, we can observe that lack of recognition, understanding and support can lead to burn out in people who “ give their life” to their organisation. In the case of traumatic stress, human bonds can help a trauma victim to reduce the hyperarousal of the sympathetic nervous system and thus mitigate the effect traumatic stress. Lack of support and institutional neglect can lead to extreme vulnerability, loss of sense of belonging, identity and meaning.

Science will probably give us new answers to the numerous questions that still remain unanswered concerning the adverse effects of stress in the field and the factors of resilience. I do believe that this future research will confirm the necessity for humanitarian workers to get support on all possible levels.

Humanitarian organisations have no control over floods and earthquakes, but they have control over the way they accompany their staff through this experience. Striving *Together for humanity* is only possible in a caring supporting environment that helps the helpers.

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