

# Caring for Your Own Emotional Well-Being: Guidelines for Relief Workers

*Workers participating in rescue and relief work after a disaster are exposed to stress which may affect their own emotional well-being.*

## WARNING SIGNS OF UNMANAGEABLE STRESS

You should be aware of some warning signs of unmanageable stress either in yourself or in your colleagues. These signs include:

- Mental confusion, inability to make judgments and decisions, inability to concentrate and to prioritize tasks
- Inability to clearly express verbally or in writing
- Anxiety, irritability, depression, excessive rage reactions
- Neglecting one's own safety and physical needs
- Sleep difficulties
- Appetite disturbances
- Excessive tiredness
- Progressive decline in efficiency
- Loss of spirit
- Self-blame
- Decreased self-esteem
- Heroic but reckless behavior
- Grandiose beliefs about yourself
- Excessive use of alcohol, tobacco or drugs

## WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOURSELF

### Self-help tips to reduce stress during relief work

- Try not to be emotionally involved, i.e. do not transfer the grief of others on to yourself. Be very kind and humane but be somewhat detached. Keep a perspective on things.
- Be proud of yourself for volunteering your services. Realize that your work is very important even if at times people do not appreciate this.
- Remember that your reactions are normal and largely unavoidable.
- Be aware of your tension and consciously try to relax. You may also do deep breathing exercises for 10 to 15 minutes once or twice a day.
- Try to find time to do something you enjoy e.g., listen to music, read a book, go for a walk or a jog, play with children, connect with a friend etc.
- If you cannot sleep or feel too anxious, discuss this with someone you can trust.
- Don't take sleeping pills, tranquilizers, alcohol or other drugs.
- Talk to someone with whom you feel at ease; describe to him/her what you were thinking or feeling. You may want to talk about very stressful things that you have experienced or witnessed during the disaster or you may want to talk about the stress of relief work and how you are coping with this. It is your choice whether or not to focus on traumatic events. It can be helpful to discuss traumatic events but you should not be hurried or pushed to talk about it. Neither should you push others to talk and think about events they may not yet be ready to focus on.

- Listen to what people close to you say and think about the event. It has affected them too, and they may share insights that will benefit you. They may also share with you their ways of coping with the suffering.
- Stay actively engaged in day-to-day activities, if possible. Continue to work on routine tasks if it is difficult to concentrate on demanding duties. Ask your colleagues/supervisor to reschedule your duties if work is too difficult.
- Tell your peers and team leader/supervisor about how the distressing event and the current stress are affecting you, so that they can understand.
- Avoid inflated or perfectionist expectations, either about yourself or others, lest you feel frustrated.
- Participate in peer group exercises to discuss and find ways of coping with the stressful experiences.
- After a few weeks if you still feel uneasy about your reactions, you should seek professional advice.
- Do not self-medicate under any circumstances.
- If at all possible, communicate with your family on a daily basis.
- Try to practice meditation. This can be very helpful in coping with stress.

### **How to do deep breathing exercise**

- Lie on the floor or on a bed.
- Place your hands on your stomach.
- Close your eyes or turn them towards your stomach. Feel the parts of your body that are in contact with the floor, or the bed – your heels, your calves, your bottom, your back, the back of your arms, and the back of your head. Try to relax your stomach so that your breathing can reach the lower part of your stomach in a natural way. Pay close attention to the movements of your stomach and your hands.
- Count to two slowly in your mind while breathing in. Then count to four when breathing out.
- Wait patiently until you feel the natural need to breathe in again.
- Breathe quietly the way you usually do.

*Source: Adapted from WHO Guidelines (Guidelines for Caring for your own emotional well being for relief worker)*