

**DIPLOMA IN  
HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE  
(DHA)  
LIVERPOOL SCHOOL OF  
TROPICAL MEDICINE**

**PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF CARE FOR  
HUMANITARIAN WORKERS**

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***“Once you have mastered yourself there is no need to master anything else. But this is difficult. Our education system, work environment, entertainment and leisure time all focus on our doing things. Introspection requires the absence of doing.”*** (Interview with Ketan Patel, Sunday Times, May 29<sup>th</sup>, reviewing his book, **The Master Strategist**)

## **1. Psychological self care and self awareness**

Exposure to life threatening situations and directly witnessing the pain and suffering of others always carries the risk of emotional numbing, self damaging coping strategies, or even emotional breakdown. It is well recognised that burnout and self destructive behaviours are most often associated with doctors, aid workers and frontline journalists. The concept of “stress” is grossly inadequate to describe the experiences of those on the front line of disasters, wars, famine, and human suffering. Emotional reactions can become ongoing, can be cumulative over a considerable length of time and/or result from specific traumatic events.

Addressing feelings and emotional reactions in these circumstances requires a particular kind of courage. It is no surprise that many prefer to overwork than take any time for internal reflection on their own complex emotional responses. When asked to reflect on their own feelings people are often understandably apprehensive. They fear that it might be painful, and might mean admitting to weaknesses or vulnerability. Although there can be similarities in emotional reactions, everyone has their own particular style of response and different kinds of coping strategies. Aid workers exposed to the same situation will not all react in the same way, and what is perceived as most potentially emotionally threatening to one person will not necessarily feel that way to someone else. Thus, psychological self care cannot be separated from increased self awareness, i.e. understanding in greater depth your own usual reactions.

Knowing and understanding yourself does involve acknowledging doubts, uncertainties and fears, but can also provide aid workers with their greatest personal strength in whatever circumstances they find themselves.

## **2. Advantages of psychological self care**

The potential advantages of greater self awareness and psychological self care include:

- A different relationship with yourself – one that is understanding and accepting of your strengths and vulnerabilities. All of the great spiritual traditions emphasise “know thyself” because of the inner strength and resilience that can bring.
- The ability to recognise and reflect on your own reactions and feelings.
- The ability to listen to your own intuitions.
- The capacity to listen accurately and actively to another person.
- The ability to look after yourself psychologically when you need to.

- An acceptance of individual uniqueness, differences and similarities.
- A clearer sense of order in terms of what matters most.
- A capacity to go against some motivations of the self if necessary.
- More effective and thoughtful decisions regarding actions to be taken.
- A healthier balance between attachment and detachment.
- A reduction of the fears associated with one's own distressing feelings and reactions and those of others.

### 3. Psychological self care and self talk

If you are not aware of what is happening to yourself psychologically, you are more likely to act out your feelings on others. For example, if you cannot admit to yourself, or do not recognise, that you are feeling angry and frustrated, you are very likely to take out those feelings on others, perhaps becoming irritable and demanding, and even acting inappropriately in difficult situations.

Your internal conversations with yourself are crucial. What are you saying to yourself about what is happening to you? Are you denying that you feel anything at all? Do you believe you are “superman” and not psychologically vulnerable? (**every** human being is vulnerable in some ways). What kind of relationship do you have with yourself? Are you kind and understanding of yourself, or punitive and critical? This relationship is the crux of how you will respond in highly demanding situations.

### 4. Dilemmas for organisations

Agencies have a dilemma in responding to psychological issues. The “stress factors” of humanitarian work are innumerable – climate, language, limited organisational support, separation from family, friends, witnessing inhumanity and tragedy, possibly for months or years, the impossibility of meeting the high expectations of others. When support is not available, the results of cumulative stress can appear after just a few weeks in the field. Do they make this explicit to their staff before departure? How much emphasis to place on the reality that the work **is** difficult, and **is** emotionally extremely demanding?

Organisations can have many constraints which may prevent them from providing appropriate support for staff – lack of resources and capacity, an organisational culture which implicitly encourages the “superman” or “hero” image, a lack of recognition of the psychological effects of the work because of the need to “get things done”, confusion over who is responsible for providing psychological support within the organisation, and most of all the operational reality – overwhelming pressures in uncertain circumstances.

Given all these possible difficulties, it is essential that organisations approach psychological well being in the same way as physical health. If someone is physically ill they will not be able to do the job to the best of their ability. If someone is not psychologically healthy, they will also not be able to fulfil their role to the best of their ability.

## 5. Psychological self care: What helps?

(CF Tony Vaux's article Setting Limits for Staff")

Tony Vaux's article focuses on the role of managers in setting limits for their staff. This is very necessary, but individuals also have a **personal** responsibility both to themselves and their colleagues to maintain their own psychological, as well as physical, health. This personal responsibility includes both a commitment to self knowledge and awareness, acceptance of the need to exercise psychological self care and tolerance of individual differences in emotional response.

Organisations can invest in the psychological self care of their staff by ensuring the following:

### Prior to departure:

- Provide information - brief workers on what can happen to them emotionally so that expectations can be more realistic
- Workshops for developing increased self awareness: help staff to learn how to recognise their own limits, review their personal experiences with stressful situations and critical incidents, and to maintain good psychological self care for themselves and their teams.

### In the field:

- A manager who is supportive and understanding and trained in the importance of emotional issues
- Limits on working hours
- Time to rest
- Time to express problems in a secure environment without feeling shame
- Compulsory time off
- Mandatory personal, professional and psychological debriefing at regular intervals

### Return:

- Coming home workshops to aid re-integration
- Mandatory personal, professional and psychological debriefing to enable time for reflection on experiences.

If psychological issues cannot be acknowledged or spoken about, and the organisational culture implicitly assumes that emotional reactions constitute "weakness", it is very difficult for workers to drop the "superman" image. Even if the person is aware that they are having some emotional difficulties, they may deny or hide their distress, making future serious breakdown or emotional collapse far more likely.

## 6. What is "debriefing"?

(CF Lovell-Hawker, D. (2002) Effective Debriefing Handbook)

There is often confusion about "debriefing". Is it only something that needs to be done after an incident that is particularly shocking, distressing and "out of the

ordinary”? Any debriefing encourages someone to talk about an incident in detail, including the emotions which the person has/is experiencing. This helps the brain to process what has happened and therefore aids emotional recovery.

In many ways, **all** of humanitarian work could be described as “out of the ordinary”! Thus routine debriefing should be part of good organisational practice. In addition, a “critical incident” is an occurrence that is recognised by all as something exceptionally distressing and shocking compared with what is considered “usual”, and in those circumstances specific critical incident briefing needs to occur.

## **7. Maintaining psychological self care**

Knowing yourself and maintaining good psychological self care will provide your greatest source of strength and inner resilience in times of hardship. If you do not understand your own emotions and reactions or deny your doubts and uncertainties, you will also be less able to listen to others and to make thoughtful, balanced decisions.

- Psychological “housekeeping” - it is essential to have time alone for internal reflection. No matter how busy, no matter how many demands, make a date with yourself on a regular basis to “sort out” your own feelings.
- Use any type of personal writing to aid this process – a diary, review of your own thoughts and feelings, etc.
- Accept that you will have some emotions which are in internal conflict
- Admit to fear, including the fear of facing your own feelings. Find the courage.
- Remember that your feelings are normal responses to extraordinary events. Sometimes they will be intense and distressing.
- Talk to yourself in a friendly, helpful way, as if you were supporting a good friend.
- Find someone to talk to when needed. Do not wait until you are reaching breaking point.

## RESOURCES

Bergman, C. (Ed) (2003) **Another Day in Paradise: Frontline Stories from International Aid Workers.** Earthscan: London.

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Stearns, S.D. (1992). **Psychological distress and relief work: Who helps the helpers?** Oxford: Refugees Studies Programme, University of Oxford.

Vaux, T. (2001) **The Selfish Altruist.** London: Earthscan

Vaux, T. (2002) Managers must set limits for staff. **People in Aid Newsletter**, Jan, 4-5.

### Web Resources

<http://www.antaesfoundation.org>

[www.headington-institute.org](http://www.headington-institute.org)

<http://www.mhwwb.org/disasters.htm> Publications

Ehrenreich, J.H. (2002) A Guide for Humanitarian Aid, Health Care and Human Rights Workers: Caring for Others, Caring for Yourself.

[www.peopleinaid.org](http://www.peopleinaid.org) Publications

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

From Bergman, C. (Ed) (2003) **Another Day in Paradise: Frontline Stories from International Aid Workers**. Earthscan: London.

**Each of the chapters in this book describes the personal experience of humanitarian workers in different countries and in different humanitarian relief situations. I have chosen the following quotes to illustrate some psychological issues.**

- **Recognising whether or not you are suited to aid work**

*Whatever drive, whatever commitment I'd felt two years before I couldn't summon it back. I wanted to leave, to return home where life was predictable and safe. Francois, however, wanted to stay. Though Chad had left me with a rattled sense of mortality, he remained unflappable. In roughly the same two year period, Francois had discovered he could stick with it and I had discovered that I couldn't. (p 60)*

- **Different people/different reactions**

*Most of us were in our 30s, full of energy, and really in love with life. Some ICRC delegates became sick with doubt, others were psychologically affected. Out of over 30 expatriates, only three were able to get through this experience unscathed. All the others were replaced by new voluntary staff. (p 71)*

- **Coping strategies/psychological survival**

*What in my life had prepared me for this moment? Strong scepticism, on the one hand, and on the other, poetry. Poetry, a great enthusiasm since I was a teenager, helped me through this reign of terror Rwanda. The strength of the poetic images gave me solace during those hard days in Rwanda. I read aloud for myself, but mostly for my colleagues, especially before dinner. (p 72)*

*We should have a break every three months no matter how much we enjoy walking into a minefield every day. (p 197)*

*I love what I am doing but at the moment I have had enough (p 200)*

*I got five letters last week, a miracle. I've sent 254 letters and received 41, not the most impressive ratio (p 203)*

- **Emotional balance and the expression of feelings**

*When death with its many odours is on constantly on the prowl, washing is important. My stomach is as regular as clockwork. Hell outside, order inside. So I went to the toilet every morning when I got up. When I took a shower I collected the water in a plastic bucket. Sometimes I would cry, crouched down in the*

*bathtub. My tears mingling divinely well with the water. Then I poured all this dirty water into the toilet, flushing away my excrement into the city's sewers.*

*The technical details are important now. How did we survive? The truth has far more to do with psychiatry than home economics. Under such circumstances it is essential for one's own mental balance to be able to get rid of one's own shit with one's own tears. The pH of the whole body, and of the soul as well, then returns to normal. The night's acidity disappears and one can walk again, without stumbling. (p 76)*

- **Hubris**

*You've really gone and done it this time. How are you going to get out of this one alive, mister high and mighty? Just who do you think you are? Batman? You couldn't save anyone before. Now, you're going to save Somalia? (p 92)*

*It was exactly the job that most boys would describe as ideal, the same mix of altruist and actor that makes the fireman look heroic. (p 232)*

- **Attachment, mutual help/dependence**

*The most remarkable aspect of our bond was that by virtue of some primal, experiential instinct, Muhammad Ali (my body guard) quickly became the organising principle around which my life was prolonged....Without me actually standing out there in the middle of the air strip every morning, at first light, waving my walkie talkie at that prayed for first food flight of the day, there would be no food. My body guard knew that by keeping me alive, he was not only keeping himself alive but his people, his clan, and Somalia itself. Those were just the rules. (p 95)*

- **Loss**

*All the women, and even some of the men were weeping. Hassan grabbed my elbow and glanced at me sideways, shaking his head. He knew, I guess I knew too, but I was fighting it in the way all madmen fight the truth. I did not want to go into the hut. My body guard, Muhammad Ali, he was in there and he was dead (p 99)*

*So yet another new face, a nurse. I wonder how many people have been through Kuito since I arrived; nobody seems to have any staying power. (p 208)*

- **Self destruction**

*They took one look at me, and declared me a human disaster area. I guess they were right. I was 40 pounds under weight, shitting water, and covered with parasitic skin lesions from one end of me to the other. They medivaced me out, unceremoniously, and I spent the next month or so in a Nairobi hospital....I thought a lot about my bodyguard, Muhammad Ali. Dear reader, he was ten. (p 100).*

- **The need to understand**

*I thought I was going to write about why there was a war in Bosnia, why people in the same family, neighbours killed each other. But I still don't understand. So I might as well drop the pretence of even trying to understand. (p 101)*

*In the end, it's easier not to try to understand, easier to keep that distance between us. (p 141)*

- **Over involvement**

*I became friendly with people on the street – an old woman, a young boy. Without these attachments I don't know how I would have got through these four years. The war was personal for me. Some might say I over identify and that I suffer from bystander guilt. I know this is true. When I am next to people who are suffering, I must do something. I have no choice. I feel so lucky that this is not my family, not my grandmother, not my mother. And this is the motivation for action. .... The feedback of knowing that we made a difference in even one person's life was so satisfying. (p 106)*

- **Anger/powerlessness**

*The first winter back in New York was exceptionally cold....we had heat in our apartment, we had hot water, there were no bombs. What was everyone complaining about?...It has taken me a long time to get over these feelings of anger at the outside world. For two years I sheltered myself, hardly going to parties or talking to people other than relief workers. When I did go out I had to force myself not to talk about Bosnia and to be interested in other people. (p 111)*

*It was looted four months ago. Before that the school boasted the finest physics and chemistry labs in Sierra Leone.....angry graffiti covers the walls and chalkboards, and the heavy wooden desks are scarred by machete blows. Dozens of computers have been smashed – a senseless waste. (p 138)*

*These glib Americans, this trash humour, it is so absolutely out of place and somehow wrong. There are refugee camps mere miles from here, with their disease, graves, scabs, terrifying testimony from survivors of atrocities....It is somehow wrong that these men do not appreciate the proximity of the horror, or have blocked it out....I see the US Army soldiers jogging past in Nike shorts, with the American flag in the distance, hoisted over Afghan soil, images of patriotism and commercialism. A complete and meaningless circle. (P 216)*

*I can think of no qualitative difference between what happened to civilians on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002, and what happened to these Afghan civilians a few months after. ... I am ashamed, yet again, of my inability to say anything. (P 230)*

- **Emotional breakdown**

*When the first signs came, I thought I had simply picked up a bug of some kind. It was odd, like a vibration or tremor deep inside my body....Over the next year and a half I went through every conceivable test and they all came back negative. I was convinced that I of all people did not have a psychological problem. The doctor told me otherwise.*

*It is not necessarily one single incident, or event, that will take your body to the precipice, but rather an accumulation of suppressed feelings, pain, denial and shock. I had been going into the field for many years and thought I could cope with anything. I did not consider how I was endangered, physically and emotionally. (p 113)*

*In the past I never liked losing control of my emotions, and I shut myself down in order to do the work. I know this is not possible any more. Sometimes it's a simple image of someone suffering a tremendous loss ... that will bring my emotions to the surface, where they belong. (p132)*

- **Emotional numbing**

*His answers come in empty whispers, and he offers nothing beyond what I ask for. I search his face for clues, an unconscious habit wherever language and culture tangle my ability to communicate. Is he angry, embarrassed? But there is no emotion in his eyes to guide me. There is absolutely nothing....in the five minutes I spent with him he seemed dead to me on a level far beyond indifference, at a depth from which I doubt he can ever resurface.*

*But it's about me. What bothers me most about Abraham is that I don't know how to feel about him...I can't find a new category for him in my head. (p 141)*

- **“Good” and “evil”**

*Sierra Leone feels evil to me. Not cold sweat, nightmare evil. Rather it whispers, swirls in street corner conversations or shuffles by on crutches. A stump where a hand has been, a head without ears, a face without lips. (p 133)*

- **Escape from the West**

*Holland annoys me: our smug and petty lives there, our easy political correctness, our circle of friends who all think and feel the same about everything. (p143)*

*Each morning I feel as if I am living a fairy tale. I love to walk around in a long embroidered dress and baggy trousers, including the exotic scarf....in the afternoons I take a translator with me to the bazaar and bargain for ethnic jewellery, let the henna painters decorate my fingers and search for pillow covers decorated with mirrors in flowery patterns.....It is like a dream.....I feel like a princess in a harem. (p 146)*

