

MITIGATING STRESS of NATIONAL STAFF Suggestions for proactive management

This document is a synopsis of the many discussions and presentations held at the Conference. It has been organized using the structure of the Antares Foundation's recently published *'Managing Stress in Humanitarian Workers' Guidelines for Good Practice'* To download a copy of this publication, go to www.antaresfoundation.org

Principle 1 *What are considered to be appropriate planning measures for reducing the sources of stress or acting to prevent or mitigate the effects of stress of National staff?*

- In-country orientations and induction trainings – cultural orientation to expatriate staff and agency ethos and practices such as work styles, communication style, attitudes and perspectives
- Relevant security briefings with specific consideration of implications for local staff
- Critical incident stress plan applied to cultural setting and local base
- Critical incident follow up plan by locally based staff
- Evacuation and emergency plans
- Provision of a locally based health promoting place (social space, down time, recreational opportunity)
- Acknowledgment of importance of family contact, family priorities and family expectations
- Use of local people to help screen, train and conduct debriefings with a combination of both international and national staff input
- Greater consideration of the role of faith, spirituality and ritual in wellbeing
- Incorporation of spiritual factors in planning group debriefing processes
- Provision for cross-cultural team bonding, team debriefing and social activities
- A culture of consultative leadership within an agency
 - Establishing clear work objectives
 - Delegating work effectively
 - Incorporating reward and praise for good work
 - Avoiding micromanagement of staff member's work
 - Taking an interest in the personal welfare of the national staff member
 - Taking an interest in the thoughts and feelings of the staff member
- Active mentoring of national staff
- Vocational development opportunities
- Formal appreciation of work and commitment

Principle 2 *What are important elements for screening National staff members before hiring and assignment with international NGOs?*

Process

- Determine the needs of the receiving community and national staff by conducting interviews and focus groups
- Design screening process informed by a relevant mix of people from different cultural backgrounds using tools such as a competency profile to identify and measure skills and qualities required for the job
- Ask local and expatriate staff to draw up a profile of characteristics and skills they would like to see in colleagues
- Receive recommendations of staff member suitability for role and context
- Investigate background of recruit, including, trauma and displacement, ethnic and religious background, community status, other life roles
- Conduct an interactive style interview giving recruit opportunity to explore strengths, limitations and vulnerabilities
- Assess predictors of cross cultural competence
- Observe participants in simulated situations
- Offer opportunity for the recruit to contact staff in field or returned staff
- Provide opportunity for the recruit to read previous reports and access information
- Screen security risks for the recruit and the impact of the job on the recruit on safety and security issues for individual and family
- Assess role conflicts within local, social and ethnic contexts
- Gain an understanding of important rituals, such as grieving processes
- Gain an understanding of religious and spiritual orientation and commitment
- Use story narrative as a process of self exploration of motivation, expectation and suitability

Criteria

- Psychological competency
 - Resilience
 - Commitment
 - Core beliefs and values
 - Motivations
 - Adaptability
 - Open mindedness
 - Ability to deal with ambiguity
 - Ability to cope with psychological strain

- Vocational competency
 - Technical knowledge
 - Technical skills
- Interpersonal skills
 - Communication skills
 - Conflict resolution skills
- Cultural competency
 - Cultural knowledge
 - Cultural sensitivity
 - Cross cultural understanding
- Background
 - Demographics
 - Previous trauma
 - Psychological wellbeing
 - History of mental health
 - Previous cross cultural experience
- Self identified criteria from local and individual perspective

Principle 3 *What constitutes appropriate pre-de/em/ployment briefings and training of National Staff?*

- Agency orientation, such as, vision, ethos, history, goals and strategic objectives
- Project context such as political, social, environmental context
- Job orientation, such as, job description, expectations, working environment
- Line of management and responsibilities
- Human resource issues such as, employment contract, termination arrangements, compensation and pay
- Cross cultural orientation to local context and working with an international team
 - Language
 - Cultural mores
 - Cultural understanding
 - Sensitivity to the culture
 - Team building exercises
- Security awareness
 - Empower individual to assess local risk
 - Consider differences in security risk to national and expatriate staff
 - Examine consequences of an evacuation
 - Identify implications for family
 - Participate in simulated security and emergency training activity

- Interpersonal skills training
 - Culturally modified conflict resolution skill training
 - Training in empathic interpersonal communication
 - Training in giving and receiving constructive feedback
 - Training in mentoring and collegial support within cultural structures
- Stress management training
 - Explore cultural concepts of stress, trauma and resiliency
 - Development of self and team awareness of stress and coping responses and strategies
 - Plan personal and team options for monitoring and responding to stress, burnout and critical incidents
 - Identify options for stress and trauma support services within agency and local contexts
- Discussion of changes at a personal level of potential risks to the impact on identity, relationships, status and frameworks in the course of undertaking humanitarian work
- Appreciation of potential personal, team, social, cultural, and organisational dilemmas that may arise, and the impact they may have on individuals, teams and management
- Dilemma management training
- Apply the principles of narrative and story telling in training

Principle 4 *What are the ways in which the response to stress of National staff can be monitored on an ongoing basis?*

- Educate staff to identify cultural differences in the expression of symptoms of stress
- Train staff to self-report stress and manage stress
- Develop reflective peer support mechanisms to reduce the cumulative stress effects
- Monitor the perceived and real levels of threat to security of national staff member & that of their family (being aware of triggers for re-traumatization experiences)
- Practice consultative leadership including
 - Taking an interest in the personal welfare of the national staff member
 - Taking an interest in the thoughts and feelings of the staff member
- Identify key local as well as agency-based social support networks
- Develop a collaborative system of monitoring the stress levels of national staff

Principle 5 *What support is required to help National staff deal with the daily stresses of humanitarian aid work on an ongoing basis?*

- Establish an agency culture of empathy, respect, openness and staff care
- Create regular opportunities for informal socialising to strengthen team relationships
- Ensure that support is addressing the underlying source of distress and not the superficial causes
- Design interventions that are culturally responsive, not be based on assumptions but on culturally responsive research and local expertise
- Construct an organised plan for proactively monitoring the impact of:
 - Job demands
 - Job role status and rights
 - Inequities between national and expatriate staff
 - Risks to security
 - Perceptions of the NGO in the local community
 - Cultural insensitivity by other agency staff
 - Prejudice and discrimination
 - Demoralisation
 - Team morale
 - Cumulative stress, fatigue, burnout and trauma
 - Interpersonal differences
 - Cross cultural differences, work styles, communication
 - Team conflict
 - Attitude, perceptions, motivations and conduct
 - Equity in performance management, rewards and promotion
 - Affirmative action in professional development opportunities
 - Opportunities for leadership training
 - Personal and collegial stress levels
 - Team, family and community support
 - Non-consultative management styles
- Support staff by being mindful of communicating in a culturally sensitive and respectable way so as to reduce the potential for 'loss of face'
- Consultative leadership from line manager
- On going mentoring in conflict resolution strategies
- Collegial support and understanding of personal, professional and cultural stressors
- Support from family. (Organisations can be more proactive in including the family network as a key support mechanism and raising awareness among family members of the stressors and risks of working in humanitarian aid organisations).

Principle 6 *In what ways can National staff be provided with specific and culturally appropriate support in the wake of critical incidents and other unusual and unexpected sources of stress?*

- Organisations need to carefully consider the implications of critical incident stress management before adopting the framework, for example, risk assessment of project context, staff roles in the debriefing process, resources, training to implement the debriefing process, culturally supportive practice, commitment to implementing evidence based practice
- Facilitators need to be adequately trained and the model needs to be appropriately adapted to the client base, particularly in the cross cultural context
- Organisations need to be committed to the notions of pre-incident training and education and post-incident follow up and monitoring. These are critical components
- Ensure that there is an understanding of the benefits of critical incident stress management
- Ensure that there is an understanding of voluntary participation in critical incident stress management debriefing
- Use evidence based models of critical incident stress management that are designed and adapted to the specific needs of the staff, including maintaining cultural integrity by researching traditional responses and coping strategies to trauma
 - Consider aspects of staff roles
 - Consider culturally acceptable responses to trauma
 - Consider the various somatic, psychological and behavioural expressions of trauma responses
 - Consider expressions of grief, guilt, shame and confusion
 - Consider relationships between staff
 - Consider individual versus collective responses to trauma
 - Consider natural support networks, such as family, kin and community
 - Consider spiritual perspectives of the meaning of trauma
 - Consider the different proximities and roles that people played in relation to the event
 - Consider individual differences in interpretation and response to events
 - Consider healing rituals and resources
- Consider the implicit humanitarian political context and agency ethos
- Promote an organisational culture that embraces self care and stress management

Principle 7 *What are the processes of personal stress debriefing, reviews and operational debriefings at the end of an assignment that would be deemed supportive for National staff?*

- There should a formalised and implemented post deployment support policy for national staff incorporating for example
 - Decompression and debriefing opportunities
 - Celebration for completing the assignment through traditional rituals
 - Debriefing including methods such as story telling, role playing and spirituality
 - Self evaluation and feedback opportunities
 - Discussion of changes at a personal level of potential risks to the impact on identity, relationships, status and frameworks in the course of undertaking humanitarian work
 - Option for a confidential debriefing by a person nominated by the national staff member, which could include independent, external, local personnel
 - Discussion of impact of work on personal relationships and frameworks
 - Check for and support access to naturally occurring social and health support networks
 - Support to explore future opportunities and plans
 - Local peer networks
 - Reunion opportunities
 - National staff alumni
- Adopt more culturally relevant or traditional processes of farewell and closure
- Discussion of changes at a personal level of potential risks to the impact on identity, relationships, status and frameworks in the course of undertaking humanitarian work
- Consider time out, relaxation, rejuvenation opportunities

Principle 8 *Following the impact of an adverse or traumatic experience, what would be considered supportive ongoing duty of care of National staff members?*

- Prior to dismissing a national staff member on the basis of incompetency, assess the presence of stress related disabilities such as depression, burnout and PTSD
- Prior to ongoing employment, agency policies regarding ongoing care of staff following a critical incident or stress related disabilities should be made explicit during the recruitment and training processes
- There should be contingency plans for ongoing staff care of stress related disabilities in the event of agency withdrawal

- A formalised monitoring process of post trauma or critical incident stress recovery should be implemented for all staff members at least 6-12 months following the event
- A negotiated stress and trauma recovery plan that is culturally appropriate and relevant to the needs of the staff member should be documented, monitored and evaluated
- Organisations should assess and adjust work-load demands and expectations of a staff member who has been adversely affected by cumulative stress and trauma or a critical incident
- There should a formalised and implemented post deployment support policy for national staff incorporating for example
 - Self evaluation and feedback opportunities
 - Discussion of impact of employment in an international NGO on personal relationships and frameworks
 - Support to explore future opportunities and plans
 - Identification of local supportive national staff community or peer networks
 - Reunion opportunities
 - National staff alumni
- Consider end of agency contract entitlements and employment references, in line with staff member's future plans, wellbeing and contexts