

HANDOUT #11: IDENTIFYING DIFFERENT FORMS OF STRESS

GENERAL DEFINITION STRESS

- » Stress is an immediate, biological and psychological alarm-reaction. of a person when s/he is confronted with something that might be a threat. This threat might be a change in our internal or external environment to which we have to adapt, and with which we have to cope. Every person reacts differently to stress, and people have different stress thresholds. Not everyone feels stress in the same situation.

Stress is a normal and natural response designed to protect, maintain and enhance life. If our ways of managing stress are adaptive and healthy, we may find stress to be a positive thing, or a challenge. Stress that we cannot manage or control well is experienced more negatively.

DAY TO DAY STRESS

- » Much of this stress is positive. It motivates us to get up in the morning, accomplish tasks, and seek out the new projects and relationships which we enjoy. As long as we have the feeling that we can control the stressors, we are okay.
- » But chronic exposure to stress or frequent exposure to very high levels of stress reduces our ability to control it and to deal with stress effectively, we can start to feel helpless. A high level of stress can have a very negative impact on our work and life.

CUMULATIVE STRESS

- » This type of stress is the most common for workers in conflict settings. It occurs when a person suffers prolonged exposure to a variety of stressors. The causes are usually a combination of personal, work, and incident specific factors that cause frustration.

BURNOUT

- » This is a response of our body and mind to prolonged occupational exposure to stress. Specifically, burnout is a reaction to demanding interpersonal situations that produce psychological strain and provide inadequate support.³

PHYSICAL REACTIONS⁴

- » Chronic fatigue
- » Sleeping problems
- » Frequent headaches
- » Ulcers, loss of appetite

³ Jenkins SR, Baird S (2002), Secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma: a validation study. *Journal of Trauma Stress* 15(5):423–432. "Managing the Stress of Humanitarian Emergencies." Geneva, July 2001,

⁴ "Managing the Stress of Humanitarian Emergencies." Geneva, July 2001, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/F6DE23010CE37D9EC1256C7C004E1D7B-unhcr-stress-jul01.pdf>

- » Emotional reactions
- » Depression
- » Anger
- » Irritability
- » Feeling frustrated or feeling trapped.

THOUGHTS

- » Having very negative thoughts about own performance or in general
- » Becoming very cynical
- » Starting to focus on your failures and failures of others

BEHAVIOR

- » Not showing up at work
- » Working very hard and long hours
- » Risk taking behavior
- » Over consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, etc.
- » Being in constant fights with colleagues

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

A critical incident is an event which has the effect of overwhelming a person's usual coping ability. Such events are usually sudden, violent, and unexpected. They often present a threat to safety and well-being and are not part of the expectable routine life experience.

SIGNS OF CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS AND SECONDARY TRAUMATISATION

- » Taking your work "home" with you: This means that even when you are not at work, when you are home or with your own family, you are unable to stop thinking about work.
- » Sleeplessness.
- » Feeling very emotional during or after working with a survivor.
- » General anxiety.
- » Feelings of being overwhelmed, like there is no way you can cope with what is happening around you.
- » Feelings of incompetence, like you can no longer accomplish what you once did well.
- » Listlessness, low-grade depression, never feeling happy or sad, just muted or numb.
- » Intrusive thoughts of patients, families and extremely stressful events, dreams, nightmares, daydreaming, recurring images, vivid mental replaying of client's trauma.
- » Anger at survivors, families, the system, self and/or at staff /culture.
- » Hyper-aroused or over-reacting to insignificant events (especially at home).
- » Revenge fantasies.
- » Haunting memories of one's own terrifying events.
- » Emotional detachment to significant others (numbing, flat affect—see below), loss of humour).
- » Flat affect refers to a change in emotional response wherein a person expresses no emotion, no matter what he or she experiences.