

## Psychological Coping in Emergencies and Crises

### Overview

This entry describes key areas where your performance and life can be affected by stress and worry associated with emergencies and crises. It also provide hints and tips to cope with such stress and worry.

### Key Points

- Your thinking, decision making, emotions and body will be affected by the stress and worry of being in an emergency or crisis. This is the case, regardless of how experienced you are.
- It is important to be aware of how this can affect your performance and take positive steps to address possible difficulties.

### Scope and Application

#### Types of emergencies and crises

There are three types of crises that we may experience in humanitarian response:

- Sudden and unexpected (very little warning if any and, usually, beyond the institution's control, e.g. IED explosion);
- Smoldering crises that take time to build up and the warning signs are usually ignored, e.g. financial crises, drought; and
- States of high alert where there is a substantial threat level and/or there is an ongoing conflict which may or may not include the implementation of a peace treaty including disarmament.

There are three stages to a crisis: pre-crisis, crisis and post crisis. We tend to focus mainly on the middle stage but it is important to think about and plan for the other two.

#### Stress and worry

Working in any of the above can lead to stress and worry.

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| <b>Stress</b> | A state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances (Oxford English Dictionary). We each react differently to stressors (internal (e.g. mood) and external (e.g. bomb alert). |
| <b>Worry</b>  | Feel or cause to feel anxious or troubled about actual or potential problems (Oxford English Dictionary). Worry can contribute to our stress and vice versa.   |

#### The impact of stress and worry

**Memory:** Your memory system has a number of components including short term and long term memory. A significant part of the space in your short term memory system will be taken up by worry if you become too concerned about an issue.

**Attention:** If you are too stressed or worried, then you may also have problems with your attention. You may focus on the wrong issue or spread your attention too widely and your biases may have the upper hand, paying attention to what you prefer as opposed to the real issue.

**Thinking:** It is important to be thinking at the right level. There are four levels at which we can work:

- **Level 1:** Downloading - We are likely to simply do what we did before in similar situations without acknowledging that the current one is different.
- **Level 2:** We note that the situation is different but we repeat what we did before.
- **Level 3:** We acknowledge the newness of the situation and adapt what we did before.
- **Level 4:** We realize that this is a brand new situation and work from high level rules and principles to create a response (Otto Scharmer).

When we are too stressed and worried, we can conduct Level one or Level two thinking that is not needed. In emergencies, we need to operate at level three or four.

Our decision-making can also be faulty. We need to balance emotions and logic for each decision. If you feel that there is an imbalance, simply silently saying, "I need a balance between logic and emotion" can be enough.

We can improve our memory, attention and thinking by firstly making sure that we are breathing properly (12-18 breaths per minute). Taking a break (even five minutes) to do some physical activity can help.

Double check your decisions and actions with a colleague. Remember, unless it is in the early stages of a crisis, that you usually have more time than you realize. Seek more help than usual from your colleagues.

### *Critical Thinking Mode*

- *This is the ability to think rapidly while holding facts and views as they come in without reaching an early conclusion about what type of crisis you are facing. These questions may help.*
- *Rapid assessment: what are the available facts? What else do you need to know about? Who do you need to work with? Who are the nominated leaders? What is their state of mind? Any biases?*
- *Have you really identified the core issues? Double-check.*
- *What immediate actions should you take?*
- *How will you keep gathering and collating information?*
- *Stop and review the impact of the actions.*
- *What more is needed - actions / information?*
- *Ensure that the physical and social needs of crisis teams are being met, e.g. having food and drink available, ensuring that people sleep at least five hours a night.*
- *Post-crisis: time off, reflections, lessons learnt, and follow-up actions.*

*(Ref: Leadership in Unconventional Crises, Lagadec)*

### **Emotions**

The ability to suppress emotions is an important skill to have so that you can function well in a critical incident or emergency. However, total suppression of emotions can have a negative impact because of the high level of self-monitoring that is required to be able to suppress.

It is important to acknowledge the emotion and then suppress it until there is a more appropriate moment. It is important to release the emotion as soon as possible, otherwise there could a negative cumulative aftereffect. There may be moments when you could be volatile, be aware of this and make sure you walk away and/or let others know that you need some time away from the response.

You could feel panicky and find it hard to breathe. Stop, walk away and take some slow deep breathes. Try to just focus on your breathing until you feel calm. Here are some breathing exercises that you could try.

You should be taking 12-18 deep breaths per minute. You can check by placing one hand on your upper chest and the other hand on your abdomen. If you are breathing properly there should be regular movement of your upper and lower chest. If you are not, then it is likely you are breathing in a shallow way. It is important to practice regular deep breathing. This will help you think and act more constructively. Here are some exercises:

### *Intentional Breathing*

Sit in a comfortable chair with a straight back. Place your hands on your sides just above your hip bones. Inhale deeply into your abdomen (your hands should move as your body expands and contracts). Exhale. Repeat this three to four times. Move your hands to the middle of your ribs. Continue breathing and feel your body expand etc. Repeat this three to four times.

Move your hands to your collar bones and, again, feel your body moving. Repeat three to four times. You have re-learned how to carry out a full breath.

### *Foundation Breathing*

Sit comfortably with your back straight, feet flat on the ground, eyes closed and hands in your lap. Start breathing in and out very slowly. This can be helped by listening to slow music with a beat and regulating your breath with the beat of the music (twelve to eighteen breaths per minute).

### *Physical Reactions*

You may be more likely to 'freeze' because you are panicking and not thinking clearly. You may be doing shallow breathing instead of ordinary breathing and so not enough oxygen is being sent to your brain and body.

It is likely that you will want to work for as many hours as possible with the least amount of sleep, food and water. This will not help anyone, especially the migrants for whom we are working.

The first and most important thing is to make sure that you are breathing properly (12-18 breaths per minute). You can practice this first and last thing at night and also check every hour that you are breathing properly.

Make sure that your posture (seated and standing) is one that helps you to breathe and to feel assertive and positive. Posture affects mood.

You need to take some rest and eat and sleep properly. This is vital. Make sure you bring some food and drink with you.

Don't do anything in excess such as smoking or drinking. None of these behaviors help and, at best, provide short term relief.

### *Normal Coping Strategies*

In the middle of an emergency or crisis, we can forget how to look after ourselves as we normally do. Think back to the best of your coping strategies and see how you can introduce them, e.g. it may not be possible to go for an hour long run every day but you could take a ten minute exercise break each morning and afternoon. You could bring some music and take five minutes every four-five hours and listen to a favorite piece of music.

## Contacts

If you have any questions, please contact the Staff Welfare Officer, Elizabeth Openshaw at [eopenshaw@iom.int](mailto:eopenshaw@iom.int).

For matters on gender, disability inclusion, race equity and equality, please contact Xavier Orellana ([xorellana@iom.int](mailto:xorellana@iom.int)) and/or the Gender and Diversity Coordination Unit ([gdc@iom.int](mailto:gdc@iom.int)).

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