

Information sheet for ERU staff and humanitarian workers

Common reactions after disasters or crisis events

It is normal for human beings to react when experiencing an abnormal situation. This is important to remember when working in a humanitarian setting where you are likely to interact with people who are living through a crisis situation and subsequently experience extreme stress and stress reactions.

People's way of reacting to a disaster or crisis event may be very different from what you are used to. Reactions are embedded in the local cultural and social setting and the support extended from within the ERU needs to be culturally appropriate and sensitive to the particular situation.

Loss and grief

Post-disaster settings are characterised by multiple losses: loss of life, property, security or hope for the future. When there is loss, people necessarily grieve; this may be displayed in 'loud' or 'silent' ways. Crying, extrovert despair, and the tearing of hair are examples of 'loud' grief; whereas withdrawal, disinterest in communication and interaction, and introvert behaviour exemplifies 'silent' grief.

Most grieving is not pathological but it does take time for the affected person to move on. ERU staff can display a helpful attitude by being available, authentic and non-judgemental. Sometimes listening to a person may be enough. Using the principles of psychological first aid is useful in assisting individuals who are going through grief. Encouraging local rituals and ceremonies (e.g. burial or cleansing ceremonies) is an effective way of supporting local coping mechanisms and will help people move through the grief process.

Stress reactions

Reactions to extreme stress vary. Initially they can be very intense and expressed in different ways. For the majority of affected people, reactions subside over time as the reality of the event is integrated and assimilated into a person's life and memory. ERU staff and humanitarian workers should not deny the intense, uncomfortable indications of stress that those affected may experience. It is helpful provide information that these reactions are normal after having lived through a crisis event and will most likely diminish over time. Intense reactions need to be referred if they persist.

Physical reactions

There may be physical reactions such as sleeping problems, headaches and bodily pains, fast heart beat, nausea, fatigue, exhaustion or worsening of chronic conditions. Some people increase their intake of alcohol, medicine or drugs to escape the pain they are feeling.

Emotional reactions

It is common to experience anxiety and become watchful, to be hyper-vigilant, to have poor concentration, and experience negative feelings such as guilt, sadness and anger. Sometimes people become disoriented, have vivid memories and try to avoid being reminded of the crisis situation they have experienced. Others react by not feeling anything at all.

Behavioural and inter-personal reactions

Stress reactions affect the way people relate to one another. This may be expressed by people isolating themselves, experiencing conflicts with others or easily getting upset. In disaster situations, some people (especially men and adolescent boys) are seen to engage in risk-taking behaviour.

End.