ICRC Staff Health Guidance

Psychosocial Support to teams after a Security or Safety Incidents

Best practices for managers and team leaders

Introduction

Managers, team leaders and colleagues are key to create a supportive and healing work environment, to mobilize and assign organizational resources and implement appropriate responses which mitigate the impact of incidents on staff wellbeing.

Supportive management at the time of an incident and post-incident may lessen the immediate, short- and longer-term negative impacts on staff, reduce staff`s suffering, reduce the prevalence of mental disorders and improve the capacity of teams and individuals to function, as well as increase employees satisfaction and motivation.

Before an incident is as important as after the incident

Healthy team dynamics and reasonable stress levels are critical to mitigate the negative effects of potentially traumatic events.

As a manager you can promote/assure the following, to help your team prepare for a possible exposure:

- Creating a supportive environment by investing in the ICRC community social life and good relationships. Social support is THE best protector for mental health.

- Mutual trust in the team contributes to a sense of safety before going into an unsafe situation and helps the recovery if an incident were to happen.

- Carry out security drills, which include discussions and preparation on safe behaviors and reactions during incidents, as it increases the sense of control during the event.

- Consider if it is at all possible to design shifts and tasks in a way which avoids exposing the same staff to several high-risk missions / field visits in a row.

- Promote that helpers and key stakeholders (i.e. team leaders, security staff, staff health, peer supporters, family liason officers, crisis cell members) receive ongoing training on how to foster psychosocial support after an incident.

- Promote trainings and/or webinars on psychoeducation for all staff – so they understand their reactions during and after an incident (i.e. assure they have all done the [module maintaining your mental health in unsecure contexts in SAFE 2](#))

- Promote that clear internal and external information on how to ask for psychological support is available in any ICRC office through posters and or leaflets. The information on intranet may be less accessible for some staff.

What can managers and team leaders do to support their teams after an incident

1. Consider who is affected

A security and safety incident may have a very large impact in terms of the number of people affected from a psychosocial perspective.
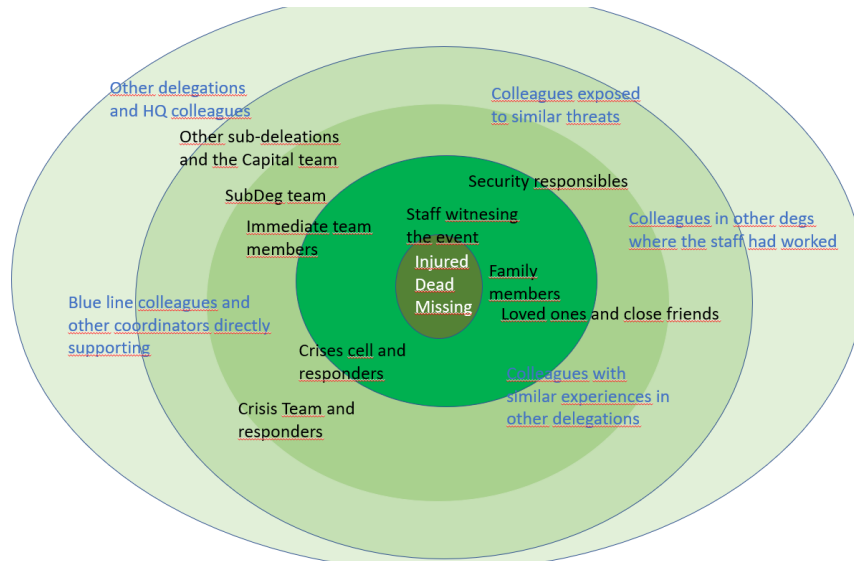
As seen in figure 1 many people might be affected. An adaptive and flexible response depending on the local needs and resources has to be considered, and liasing with others in the wider circles as well.

Some best practices are highlighted bellow.

2. Top issues to consider

A review of evidence has shown that there are Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid–Term Trauma Intervention[1].

- Promote a sense of safety
- Promote a sense of efficacy/empowerment (individual and team)
- Promote connectedness
- Foster calmness
- Provide (realistic) hope

In this section actions you can take are proposed within this frame:

Promote a sense of safety

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[1] 2007. Hobfoll, S. E., et al Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid–Term Mass Trauma Intervention: Empirical Evidence, Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes, 70:4, 283-315, doi:10.1521/psyc.2007.70.4

Cover basic needs first, such as health check up, food, water, clothes, telephone or communication, etc.

Regaining a sense of safety is not the same as being safe. Sense of safety is a perception so proactively ask "what would help you to feel safe".

Keeping the staff (and families when relevant) together in a safe place, like residences or hotels, if possible, needed and wished.

Safety involves safety from rumors, "horror stories" about the event or similar events and exposure to sensationalistic news which may increase the perception of threat. Provide regular and clear information on the facts, the unknown and the next steps. Remember that "no information is information" so communicate regularly even if it is to say there is no further news.

Watch this practical video on tips to communicate with staff after traumatic events[2]

Remind the teams to limit their own exposure to unnecessary horror stories and to take care of each other by not sharing un-verified rumors and/or scary stories.

Promote that the team and the individuals focus their attention on the (safe) surroundings and if needed repeat "you are safe now".

Avoid sharing your own past stories. A sense of safety is also about having someone who listens to their story in their uniqueness.

Promote connectedness
Social support is the best protector for mental health. For it to be effective it needs to be proactive, and respectful, so that it is perceived as useful.

Ensure staff can contact families and beloved ones if wished.

The impact of an empathetic response from managers is immense, it has a very positive impact on reinforcing the work commitment and the sense of belonging to the Organization. Show concern for the staff involved in the incident through direct contacts, calling or visiting them, and find out how they are coping and what support they need.

Ensure a welcoming and supportive environment if a team is returning from a difficult intervention or has suffered an incident.

Promote mutual support amongst colleagues, so that affected staff is not alone (unless they explicitly ask for it). Remember the

In the aftermath of the death of a colleague, promote participation in memorial services/ceremonies.

Promote a sense of efficacy/empowerment (individual and team)

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[2] You will have to create an account with Disasteready.org – it´s worth it as they have a lot of great short videos and resources

Often security or safety incidents evoke feelings of helplessness and lack of control. Regaining a sense of control over the environment fosters recovery.

Cognitive functioning can be affected so <u>support with problem solving</u>. This can be done by assisting and guiding individuals to break down the problem into small, manageable units and helping to think of alternatives.

When decisions must be made for others, it is critical to <u>keep the affected colleagues informed</u> of all actions taken on his/her/their case, including any findings from the investigation that you can share.

Information is power. Assure <u>all staff are informed consistently and regularly</u> of policies and procedures which affect them.

<u>Encourage a gradual return to normal daily routines</u> but help teams to manage excessive workload or demands.

Foster calmness

Some anxiety is a normal and healthy response required for vigilance. No reason to be alarmed at somewhat heightened levels of arousal or, paradoxically, numbing responses that provide some needed psychological insulation during the initial period. Regaining a sense of calm can be fostered by collective actions.

Staff will need <u>time off to recover and regain their balance</u>. Consider the need to use the HR special leave (link) or to facilitate a brief R&R outside the project, especially in high security settings or contexts where workload reduction is not possible.

Encourage people to <u>increase activities that foster positive emotions</u>, such as prioritizing aspects of their work they enjoy most.

Promote that <u>staff has easy access to mental health support</u>. Discuss with the staff health team the options available.

<u>Promote self-care</u>, passing appropriate information on the resources offered and on positive coping mechanism, enable time for self-care activities

Provide (realistic) hope

<u>Recognize the impact of the incident</u> and if appropriate <u>remind the team of their strengths and the human capacity to recover</u>.

If operations are halted make sure to <u>inform on the long-term strategy</u> and what would be the conditions which would allow to resume activities (especially relevant for those in resident contract as they might be part of the affected population).

Assure staff are aware of the <u>Staff Support Ecosystem</u> available for them and <u>discuss any specific concerns around job security</u> as soon as possible.

<u>Operational debriefings on incidents</u>

After a security and safety incident, managers need to debrief the staff involved in the incident in order to make appropriate security and risk analysis. These debriefings may trigger traumatic emotional reactions, a special attention needs to be considered for all the people who may be, directly or indirectly, involved or potentially affected.

In general:
- the debriefing occurs in a very empathetic context where the staff difficulties are acknowledged;
- small groups are to be prioritized;
- participation in group debriefings should not be mandatory and the option for an individual discussion made available;
- the debriefing should be mainly limited to the narration of the event, without probing into emotional or psychological signs, and yet be open to listen to those who need to share their emotional experience ;
- if detailed accounts are needed check regularly if the person(s) are showing signs of distress and adapt the pace;

Strong emotional reactions after an incident are common and should be acknowledged as part of a recovery process.

Crisis management teams and responders

As seen in the graph of circles of impact crisis cell members, as well as other responders are affected. Higher arousal levels need to be acknowledged and crisis teams (including you!) need to recover.

In the even of an open crisis that remains over time establish a plan for rotation and to assure R&R. Discuss and agree on a handover of non-crisis related urgent tasks the crisis members cannot respond to from their usual workload.

Consider a stand-down plan for teams that have managed the operational and support response after an incident. Give and take time to rest and assimilate what you have experienced. Recognise that the crisis teams may be affected by what they have heard and felt.

A note on time frames

These principles can be adapted to different responses as time passes.

Who can support you

Discuss with Staff Health team in your delegations and remember the possibility to reach out to Staff Psychosocial Regional coordinators/delegates to support you and your management team on other specific actions which can foster these principles adapted to your context and situation.

For more tips and ideas for staff mental health go to: Staff Health Wiki
Feel in need of psychological support? Here is how to