

Provision of quality and timely psychological first aid
to people affected by Ukraine crisis in impacted countries

PEER SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATIONS

There are two main types of peer support systems often used in the Red Cross Red Crescent:

- **Buddy support** between for example pairs of volunteers or pairs of volunteer team leaders. In this type of peer support, the relation is mutual as buddies as equals give and receive support. Buddy support can be a formal as well as an informal arrangement.
- **Peer support** by a trained peer supporter that offer support to peers helping in situations of distress and after critical incidents.

BENEFITS OF PEER SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The outcomes of peer support systems are generally assumed to be:

- Have proven helpful in various institutions
- Are inexpensive
- Are highly accepted by their fellow workers
- Provide easy and rapid access to help
- Counteract that people enter a “sick” role
- Have good knowledge about the work environment
- More easily can identify people in need of help than outside agencies
- Provide help that is less stigmatizing than other forms of support
- Have a positive influence on the work environment (increased work morale, reduced incidence of sick leave)

Guidelines for peer supporters. Support to UNICEF staff following chronic and critical stress. Center for Crisis Psychology, Norway. Undated.

A consensus study underlined how peer support is beneficial in high-risks organizations:

“To reduce the impact of traumatic exposures it is important to provide immediate practical support to those engaged in dealing with a trauma or disaster, and to ensure that emergency response staff are demobilized (such as standing down from ‘combat-ready’ status) at the end of each shift in order to allow for emotional and mental processing of the event and time to promote self-care and recovery. Although debriefing is not designed to prevent or treat PTSD (Regal and Dyregrov, 2012; Ruck et al., 2013), the provision of an organizational early intervention following a traumatic incident meets several needs for leaders and their teams including:

- a) Mutual support that is highly valued by workers,*
- b) An opportunity to identify workers requiring clinical support,*
- c) An increase in level of social cohesion,*
- d) A reduction in harmful responses (e.g. alcohol abuse),*
- e) A reduced level of sick-leave, and*
- f) Increased performance*

Guidelines for peer support in high-risk organizations: An international consensus study using the delphi method (Creamer et al., 2012).”

It is important that both types of peer support systems are confidential, voluntary, supported by management:

- Are created among **peers**. A peer is someone on the same level and hold the same power in the organization as for example buddies are both volunteers but cannot be a volunteer and a team leader or staff member who holds managerial or technical responsibilities.
- Are built on **confidentiality** as buddies or peer supporters do not inform others on what they share in the buddy pair and a peer supporter does not disclose what is being shared with the peer supporter. Managers must respect this. Confidentiality will only be broken in case of breaches of the IFRC Code of Conduct or the buddy or peer is in danger.

- Are **voluntary**. No one should be forced to be buddied or to talk to a peer supporter. Volunteer team leader can for example set up a buddy system for a period and then discuss if, when and how volunteers want to use it. A buddy system can be dormant for a period if tasks and **activated if** the situation requires it. Buddies can be changed at regular interval if team composition changes etc. If one buddy is promoted to from volunteer to staff member, the remaining buddy will get another buddy.

BUDDY SYSTEM

The term originated in the safety industry and has been used for the mutual safety of the partners in hazardous situations. This underlines the protective aspect of buddy systems. Nowadays, many police and rescue services use buddy systems as part of their daily practice.

Buddy systems build relationships between co-workers who are on equal power level in the organization, creates trust and understanding and makes it easier to speak up. Buddy systems develop confidence, as people are more likely to be innovative and creative if they have a support system behind them. If they have someone validating that what they are doing is right, and encouraging them to do their best, then they build more confidence in themselves.

Verbalizing what is on one's mind creates awareness of thoughts and feelings, and buddy routines enable buddies to test the reality of their thoughts and feelings. When engaged in such ongoing dialogues and self-disclosures, bonds between buddies are strengthened and they can act quickly in challenging situations as they know and rely on one another. Research has shown that working with difficult tasks those working in pairs have a lover heart rhythm than those working alone.

Buddy systems generally create trust, empathy and promote honesty quicker and easier than in large groups. It is easier to say to a buddy that the task is too demanding than to stand up in front of a whole team.

In emergencies it can be useful to buddy an experienced staff member or volunteer with a newer member of the Red Cross. It is important the more experienced one is supportive of the newer member and does not dominate. The buddy system can be adapted and used in volunteer organizations for more general and trust building peer support.

Training with a buddy as co-facilitators, makes it easier to show consideration for one another and it will be easier to step in if already knowing where the other needs support.

PHASES IN BUDDY SYSTEMS IN WORK TEAMS

The formalized approach helps buddies mentally prepare, check in, and defuse through the following phases:

- **BEFORE: Are you ready?**
- **DURING: Checking in**
- **AFTER: Cool down**

BEFORE: ARE YOU READY?

Through explicit preparation buddies get ready for the assignment carried out in pairs or alone if a buddy is absent.

1. First buddies go over their mental preparedness to handle what will happen and agree what they are to do.
2. Next, they clarify if they need to park worries or if there are practical issues, they need to finalize that would otherwise occupy their minds.
3. They need support from each other during the assignment.
If responding in a crisis, they talk over, what they can expect to meet during the task. They discuss a plan A and plan B.

Examples of questions for the getting ready phase:

- How are you today?
- Is there anything that prevents you from being fully mentally present today?
- Is there anything that you need to mentally put aside?
- What can you do to get the most out of the work today?
- Do you need any support from me today?

DURING: CHECKING IN

During intense or emergency work it is important to include a check in phase. When the level of arousal is high in times of intense and distressing workload, the practice of checking in is important to ensure volunteers take time out to breathe, take care of themselves, economise with their mental resources, as all of this can ensure they keep the focused and have an overview of their work.

Examples of questions for the check-in:

- How are you doing?
- Did you eat, drink, and have breaks?
- Did anything happen, we should talk about?

AFTER: COOL DOWN

During the cool down phase, buddies finish the assignment by talking it over. They share how they are doing, and the first impressions of how it went. Next, the cool down is part of information and learning sharing. Finally, it marks the end of the assignment, a transition to the rest of the day and is used to share plans for restitution.

Examples of questions for the cool down and are you ready to end the day:

- How was the day for you?
- What was the most important learning of the day?
- Anything you need to put aside before moving on with the day?
- Any selfcare plans for the rest of the day?

BUDDY CONSTELLATIONS

Introducing a random pairing of buddies for a clearly defined period, as for example a training, usually works well. The same random pairing of buddies works well for a crisis intervention of up to three weeks. Once the buddy conversations are well known by volunteers, buddy constellations can change depending upon the tasks. In such situations buddies change depending upon who will work with whom for a giving assignment. They can also be involved in deciding how to continue the creating their own buddy system. They may want to change buddies regularly, or to let the buddy system lie dormant for some time, and next revive it when there is a crisis event to respond to.

ADAPTING BUDDY SYSTEMS

Buddy systems can be adapted in many ways to fit the situation as when buddies:

- who used to be in the same team no longer work the same shifts. Ensuring each other's well-being and safety. They can still check in with each other regularly and take time for scheduled conversations on how they are doing.
- have met in one context as in a training, and they decide to continue to check in on each other at regular intervals.
- work across countries and even continents. If being sent on a mission into unknown situations with new colleagues, a known buddy at home will be a stabilizing influence; someone who know you and your patterns of reactions well and can offer useful feedback.

In a situation where buddy systems aren't used, reaching out to a peer to suggest they buddy is an option. Rather than waiting for someone to establish a system it is possible to take steps to improve one's mental well-being by buddying up with a peer.

SETTING UP AND TROUBLESHOOTING BUDDY SYSTEMS

When a unit decides to establish buddy systems, the aim and work modality should be explained to the team including the fact that it is voluntary to take part. Take time to discuss with the team how they see the system would work in their context and take care not to diminish any worry such as the worry that it may be time consuming. Rather find ways to adapt the system in a way that fit the team. What if

- new members join a team that uses buddy systems, ask for a pair to include the buddy as an efficient way of onboarding a new team member. Be specific about when new pairs will be formed.
- someone does not wish to be buddied it should be ensured that they are still included and feel valued in the team. Agree with the team when to evaluate how it works and if and when to change buddies.
- it becomes clear that some of the pairs aren't doing well, approach them and help them find a solution to an eventual misfit. An easy solution is for each to join another pair of buddies until team composition change and new buddy pairs are formed.
- someone is absent from the team due to a short period illness or other engagements; another pair can buddy up for the day or week.

PEER SUPPORT BY A TRAINED PEER

The set up in peer supporter systems may vary but the main difference from buddy systems is that they are rarely as systematized. Even so, the very fact that the option for support from a peer supporter exists, is appreciated by volunteers.

Peer supporters (sometimes called peer counsellors) are first identified and next trained in offering psychosocial support to their fellow volunteers. They may be identified due to their professional background and education and they receive training in psychological first aid, psychosocial support, crisis interventions, ethical considerations, and making safe referrals.

Peer supporters are equal to those they support and at the same time possess skills and knowledge in offering psychosocial support. Many self-help organizations as for example Alcoholics Anonymous rely on peer supporters having worked through the same type of issues as those they support. *Been there, done that.* In a Red Cross Red Crescent context, it is important for a volunteer that the peer supporter knows and understand the Movement, the fundamental principles, and is themself a volunteer.

The set up in National Societies can vary from having a trained peer supporter in each team, in some cases a peer supporter in the neighboring team and vice versa, in the branch or region to having a dedicated group of nationally appointed volunteers that any volunteer can call for immediate peer support.

Where peer supporters are on call, the volunteer wishing to talk to the peer supporter, will self-refer. Where peer supporters are part of the team, neighboring team or branch, they can also themselves reach out to teams or individual volunteers after a critical event.