



MODULE

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR STRESS DIFFERENTLY



Illustrations : JC Pillot / Thanks to J. Cuckow & J. Boucly for translation

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Introduction:

Whether this is your first departure on mission or not, as with any emergency staff (firemen, first aid workers, medics...), you will be exposed to emergency and distressing situations. You will be even more exposed in countries in conflict near threatened civilian populations.

These situations provoke intense emotional reactions: stress reactions.

The word “stress” is used to express an emotional overloading.

Stress is an adaptation reaction to the increasing constraints the environment exerts over the individual. The balance between the demands of the situation and the abilities of the individual is broken. Stress is not always negative for it can also temporarily maximise performance. However, stress mobilises a huge quantity of energy, which is difficult to manage in the middle term.

Stress management allows you to become aware of the presence of stress; its aim is to identify and to normalise reactions, and to reduce as far as possible any negative consequences whilst on mission and once back.

YOU ARE CONCERNED BY THIS MODULE:

**YOU
YOUR FAMILY
YOUR FRIENDS.**

I. THE STRESS :

Confronting a new situation is stressful.

On mission, basic stress is linked to the *integration* into a new environment and to the *adaptation* to an unknown situation.

Before departure you need to get prepared for this unknown while managing various formalities (leaving a job, a flat, sort out administrative formalities.)

The people around you who you are leaving are also concerned by this stress: the departure plan may cause your friends and family to question and worry.

1.1. For you:

Before departure:

Departure preparations as well as the training are meant to help you get to know the environment and your new functions.

You will be given information relating to the country and to your specific role.

Don't remain isolated!

Participate!

Communicate!

Benefit from information you will receive and from the discussions you will have with other people, use these discussions to establish: the way of living, clothing and food habits, situation in the country, your role in the field...

Don't forget that it is normal to have doubts and questions when confronted by the unknown.

2.1. *Stress factors:*

- **Organisation of activities on mission:** lack of monitoring of the teams, lack of communication between the members of the mission, badly defined tasks...
- **Communication difficulties:** may be linked to the state of the infrastructure (road or telephone networks), to the authorisations required, relational problems within a team that make information transmission or reception difficult. Bad communication can provoke incomprehension and isolation within a team.
- **The mission context:** Authorities' hostility, populations' suffering, dissatisfaction or animosity of the population.
- **Living environment:** unsuitable food, bad housing conditions, lack of comfort, of water, of hygiene, promiscuity, cold, heat, noise, communal living 24 hours a day.
- **Security:** the instability of the situation, risky and uncertain trips, threats, and the proximity of fighting.

- **The volume of activity:** when activity is suspended (stand-by due to insecurity or evacuation.), or because of the lack of leisure opportunities outside of the projects' activities. Also in case of hyperactivity, when the activity volume provokes an over-load.



2.2 HOW STRESS CAN BE AVOIDED.

To successfully complete your mission, you need all your energy to be and to stay efficient.

YOU NEED TO KEEP YOUR BALANCE.

1.- Have a healthier life: to mobilise your energy,
You need to have regular meals and rests,
Respect your sleep rhythm, sleep enough,
Respect the rest breaks,
Do some physical exercise.

2- Be your own master:
Moderate your consumption of alcohol, tobacco and medicines.

3- With the aim of relieving the populations' distress, your mission is dependent on team work. **The “buddy system” or the friends and mates system** is a basic strategy for crisis intervention groups and for any team working in a stressful atmosphere. The buddy system implies an agreement between two colleagues to make up a pair and to give each other permission to intervene when one or the other notices any kind of stress or signs of tiredness in their friend.

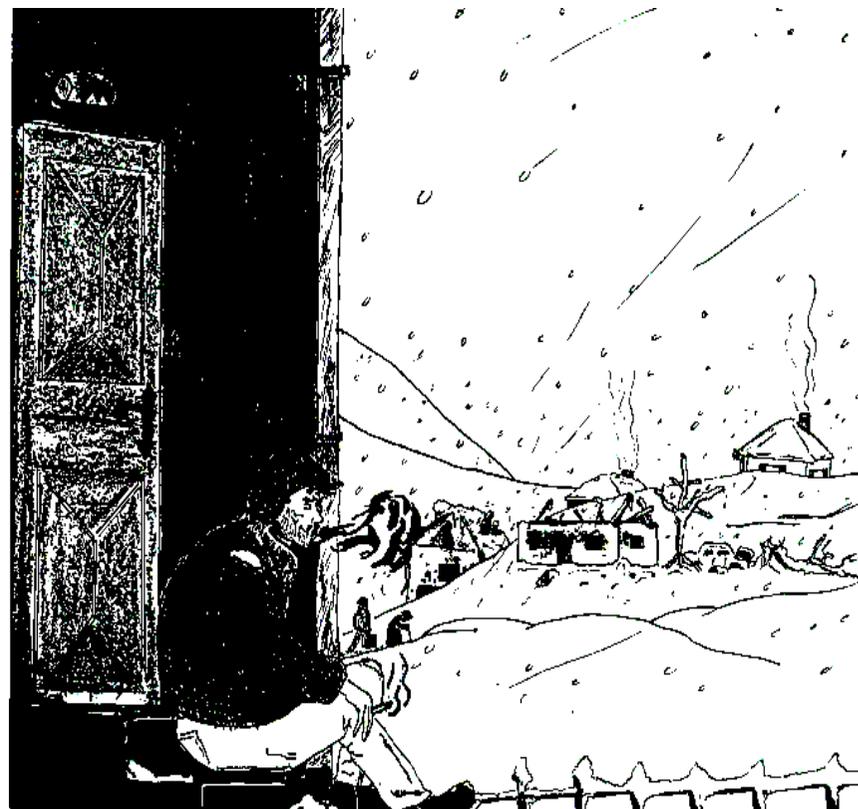
4- Keep in touch with the people around you: on the mission but also with your relatives, do not get isolated!

5-Three-monthly evaluations which are undertaken with the head of mission are vital to sort out details on your mission, to set priorities, to avoid unnecessary loss of energy.

2.3. *Signs of stress*

Stress is a complex mechanism, which affects the behaviour, emotions, physique, and the way of thinking.

On a psychological level: tiredness, difficulties concentrating, anxiety, depression, irritability, nervousness, impulsiveness, lack of motivation, drop in self esteem, loss of confidence.



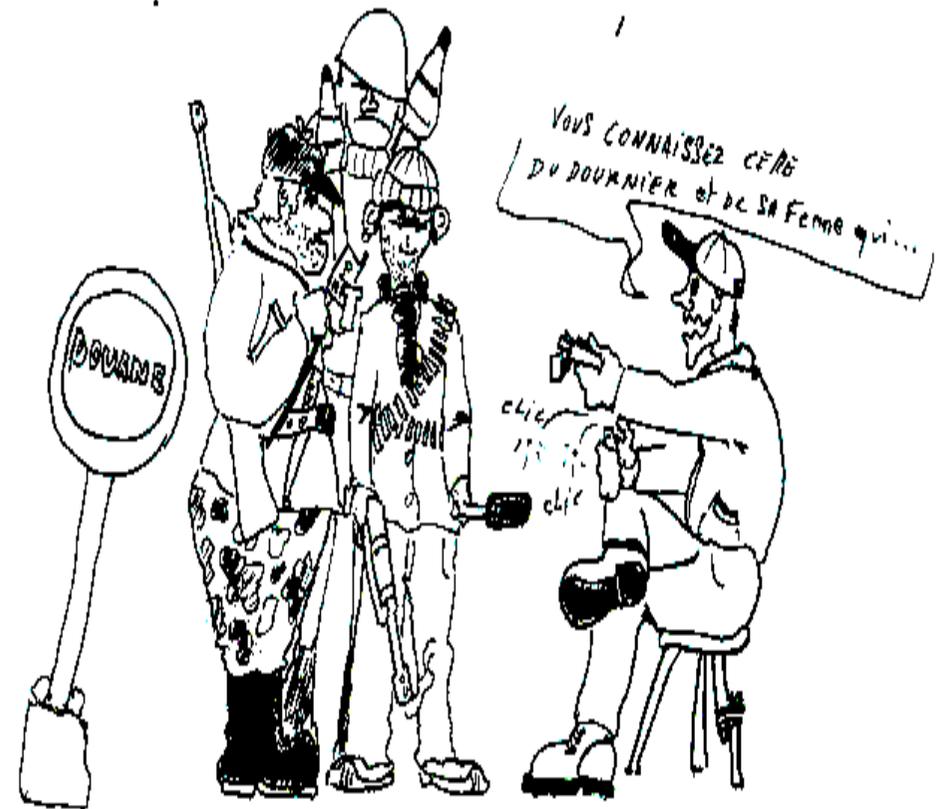
On a physical level: muscular tensions (back, neck, shoulder, jaws), insomnia (difficulty in getting to sleep, waking in the middle of the night), chronic pains, digestive disorders (from the lump in one's throat, to stomach pain and even to ulcers), sexual problems, gynaecological troubles (i.e. loss of periods), skin troubles (herpes, red spots, itching), palpitations and sweating....

On a behavioural level: aggressive behaviour or inhibition, alcohol or tobacco consumption, bulimia, anorexia, agitation, hyperactivity.

On a performance level: concentration difficulties, memory trouble (memory overloaded, oversights), slowing of work, loss of enthusiasm or of the will to do things, reduced productivity.

The first consequence is professional exhaustion. If cumulative stress is not taken into account, it can lead to overworking and can evolve into a depressive state.

Exhaustion gradually affects your behaviour. It finds expression in frustration. But also, by a loss of objective analysis of the environment, which can jeopardise not only your security but also that of the team. As you are focused on everyday life, you may lose your ability to step back, in getting used to risks, you can no longer analyse the evolution of the situation. You can compromise your own security and that of others.



Exhaustion can provoke the deterioration of relationships with others. You feel that you are not up to fulfilling your tasks anymore, you feel isolated and misunderstood. You have difficulty communicating with others, you lose your motivation and you do not recognise yourself.

2.4. *Rules to follow.*

Stress is not fatal... everyone can try and anticipate the excesses due to stress.

Pay attention to the stress signals, regularly apply the elementary principles to prevent stress (healthy life, rhythm of work)

Time to recuperate: “breaks”, the frequency of which depends on the security context, are the best moments to take a rest, to step back and to take care of yourself.

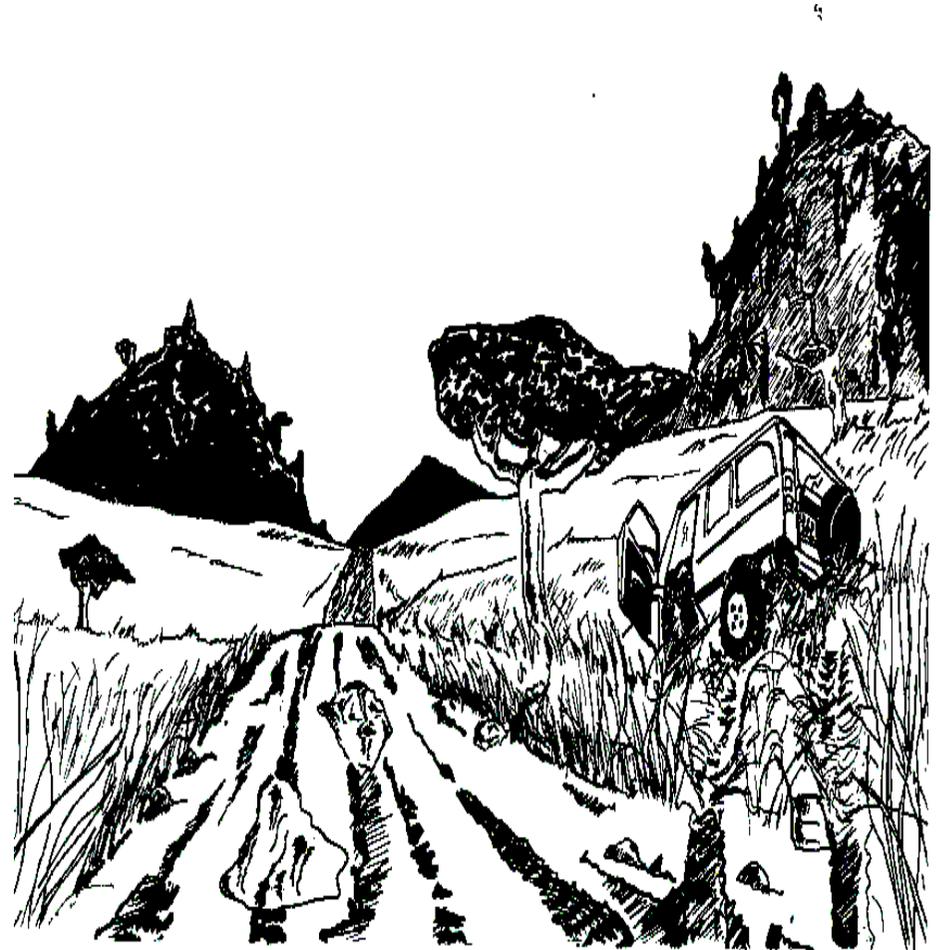
Communicate, share your emotions, and do not get isolated. Expressing yourself helps you to step back, to have a clearer understanding of your difficulties. Speak regularly, tell the others about your day, and speak about the problems you have confronted.

As far as the professional context is concerned, accept that you cannot do everything, **you have your own limits.** Do not hesitate to ask your head of mission and coordinator for an assessment of your targets and priorities.

3. **Traumatic stress:**

3.1 Definition

Unlike basic or cumulative stress, traumatic stress is unpredictable.



Traumatic stress is linked to a critical event, i.e. an event that is:

unique,

unexpected

in the face of which the individual is powerless,

which is directly or indirectly linked to death.

*And that provokes,
very great anguish.*

It is a situation where you come suddenly close to death, or when you looked death in the face. At a given moment in time, life turns upside down, this confrontation with death provokes an immediate stress and can also lead to post traumatic stress.

Examples of critical incidents:

armed robbery with direct death threats, shots, sexual violence, car accident

Faced with this uncommon situation, both body and mind react.

- **Physical reactions** can be: trembling, cold sweats, nausea, nervous exhaustion...



- **Thoughts** will be mobilised by strong emotions, irritability, anger and also feelings of invulnerability, of powerlessness, hyperactivity.

- **Behavioural difficulties** can appear: dangerous behaviour, hyperactivity, and fits of anger.

These worrying tendencies are normal. They can last a few months and diminish gradually. Difficulty concentrating, focusing your attention, taking decisions and the feeling lost can accompany these reactions.

If these reactions to stress last for more than one month, they can lead to a post traumatic stress.

Post traumatic stress:

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – PTSD

Appears when there is a complication in the consequences of traumatic stress: the traumatic event is lived through again or denied, troubles endure (nightmares, flashbacks, strong emotional backlash). This can persist into the long term. In this case, psychological monitoring must be sought in the host country.

3.2. The debriefing:

As soon as possible after any critical incident, a debriefing must take place, if possible in the field.

With this method, post traumatic stress can be avoided.

An international team from Action contre la Faim’s headquarters, trained to do debriefing, is able to go on the field as soon as a critical incident occurs. According to the situation, one or two people will go to the field.

According to the situation, debriefings can be done with one or two “debriefers” for a group debriefing, when several people have been affected by the incident at the same time.

Sometimes this kind of debriefing is not enough to avoid post traumatic stress. Once back in the country of origin, psychological monitoring will be offered

3.3. Other difficult situations:

Even if a critical incident has not occurred, you and other members of the mission may have been confronted by testing situations (difficult evacuation, armed robbery without death threats, security incidents during a trip...)

This kind of situation can generate stress. To recover one’s balance, you need first to recover from this emotional overloading.

What course of action should be taken?

-do not deny the emotions the situation provoked (fear, anguish), it is not a tragic event but an important one.

You need some time to recover, even briefly.

- give your colleagues, who have had a difficult time, a simple and warm welcome. Emphasise the protective framework of the team, listen to them, do not give solutions, just speak to each other.

4. Back from the mission:

You have just lived an intense period, you come back with strong emotions and tensions you have accumulated.

The return releases emotions and tensions when you reintegrate into your own environment and when you wonder about your future.

Common reactions:

Before the return:

- Revival of energy and activity.
- Disruption of sleep and appetite.
- Reduction in concentration.
- Idealisation, feelings of joy, excitement, anxiety, apprehension, agitation, and impatience.

On returning:

- Feelings of frustration, anxiety, sadness, emptiness, confusion, agitation, irritability, and impatience.
- Disruption of sleep and appetite
- Tiredness, lethargy.
- Excessive tendency to spend money.
- Rise in alcohol consumption (tobacco, medicines, and drugs).

Renegotiations of relationships when back: difficulty in restoring the intimacy (emotional, physical, and sexual). Disappointment in having lost one's freedom and autonomy. Feelings of excitement, disorientation, rancour, frustration, disappointment, anxiety and numbness.

The return to country of origin must be seen as a new mission. It is a necessary to readapt.

4.1. Solutions

The return from mission will be even more serene if you have carefully used your strengths and you have got ready for the idea of your return

Before the return: share your feelings of anxiety and excitement. Speak about your expectations and your desires regarding your return, especially to the people concerned. Be realistic about your return, try not to idealise the reunions. You can begin to think about your future beyond the holiday plans, will you go on mission again? Do you want to re-orientate yourself?

Debriefing at headquarters: your return will give you the opportunity to meet the technical and operations departments. These meetings finalise the handover from you to your replacement in the field and complete your mission. A complementary interview that will take place with the Human Resources Department will provide an assessment of your mission. This debriefing, which is confidential, allows you to free yourself from the weight of the mission and from your emotions.

The debriefing at headquarters also allows you to decide on your future within Action Against Hunger / Action contre la Faim.



On your return: set few long and medium terms objectives and try to achieve them. Control your consumption of alcohol and medicines, do activities you like.

Renegotiation of relationships: First try to restore relationships with your family/partner/close friends; share your experiences and feelings and show interest in theirs. Keep in mind that your family/partner have had to adapt themselves to your absence and that it will take time for them to readapt themselves to your presence. Do not forget that your family/partner and your relations have not experienced another culture, as you have.

4.2. For your relatives, partners and close friends to know.

- Avoid organising too many welcome activities, the normal atmosphere of the family is already demanding enough for the person who comes back from a mission.
- Expect that your child/friend/partner perceives things differently after having been plunged into another culture, they may be less tolerant towards certain familial habits that they used to accept.
- Be patient, let your child/friend/partner who is coming back from mission, know that you would like to know more about his/her experience when he/she is ready to speak about it.
- Show that you accept and support the signs of his/her greater autonomy and maturity.

- Do not forget that young people can be undergo important changes (physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual) during a posting to a mission, especially if it is the first long absence from their family. You will have to show patience, and tolerance to accept and integrate those changes.

