

## TYPES OF STRESS

Here are some of the types of stress that can affect personnel in crisis situations.<sup>1</sup>

**Basic stress** is an individual's 'baseline' or underlying stress. This may be caused by various 'ordinary' sources of personal, family and social tensions. It may also be increased by changes in the day-to-day environment, and normally decreases within a few hours, days or weeks of a new assignment.

**Cumulative stress** results from the prolonged exposure to work and non-work stress factors such as heavy workload, poor communications, the frustration of not being able to meet the needs of the local/community population, having to cope with situations in which one feels powerless, lack of basic comforts, and inability to rest or relax. In most circumstances, this can be managed adequately by people themselves, individually or together with peers, but in more stressful situations such as disasters and armed conflict, cumulative stress can escalate quickly and exhaust normal coping mechanisms for stress. Note that the key to identifying cumulative stress is changes in an individual's behaviour.

Common signs of cumulative stress include:

- Physical symptoms: overtiredness, diarrhoea, constipation, headaches, abdominal and back pains, sleeping disorders, appetite changes
- Emotional signs: anxiety, frustration, guilt, mood swings, undue pessimism or optimism, irritability, crying spells, nightmares, apathy, depression
- Mental signs: forgetfulness, poor concentration, poor job performance, negative attitude, loss of creativity and motivation, boredom, negative self-talk, paranoid thoughts
- Relational signs: feeling isolated, resentful or intolerant of others, loneliness, marriage problems, nagging, social withdrawal, anti-social behaviour
- Behavioural changes: increased alcohol, drug and/or tobacco use, change in eating habits or sexual behaviour, increase in risky behaviour, hyperactivity, avoidance of situations, cynical attitudes
- Challenges to belief systems: feeling of emptiness, doubt in religious beliefs, feeling unforgiven, looking for magical solutions, loss of purpose of life, needing to prove self-worth, cynicism about life
- In a team, the following group reactions may be the effect of cumulative stress: anger towards managers, lack of initiative, clique formation (inner and outer 'circle'),

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<sup>1</sup> IFRC. (2009). *Managing stress in the field*. 4th ed. Geneva: IFRC. Available at: [ifrc.org/Global/Publications/Health/managing-stress-en.pdf](http://ifrc.org/Global/Publications/Health/managing-stress-en.pdf) [Accessed 30 Nov 2016].

conflict between groups, high turnover of personnel, negative attitude towards workplace, critical attitudes towards colleagues, scapegoat mentality.

**Culture stress** is the normal experience of adjusting to the demands and ways of doing things in a new culture (including national, multinational, and organizational cultures).

**Culture shock** however is much more intense. It is the overwhelming experience of anxiety, confusion, value dissonance, discouragement, and identity confusion that results from trying to get one's needs, wishes, and preferences met in unfamiliar or unavailable ways in a new culture(s). It is usually understood to be a 'normal and temporary' experience in a new setting and minimized by pre-mission orientation, previous cross-cultural experiences, and active involvement in the new culture. (Many people experience unexpected culture shock when re-settling into their home culture. The expectation that things will feel normal leads to frustrations and disappointment when an individual has to adjust to the natural evolution of culture, language and personal development.)

**Burnout** is related to an accumulation of chronic, unresolved stress over time, from overwork, too high expectations/disappointments, exposure to problems, poor self-care and social support, etc. leading to incapacitating emotional distress and behavioural dysfunction.

**Compassion fatigue** is a special type of burnout, experienced by those who deal with people's problems, characterized by physical and mental tiredness and a lack of motivation to be in a helping role.