

COMPASSION FATIGUE OF HUMANITARIAN WORKERS

During armed conflicts, emergency operations or natural disasters, humanitarian workers may be exposed to disorder and confusion, confronted with scenes of destruction and with intolerable human suffering. They may become in their turn "secondary victims".

Such conditions may bring about significant demands and challenges for individuals:

- Hard work sometimes to the limits of endurance
- Less than basic accommodation, with living quarters which are either too close to their workplace or too far away, requiring long and tiring journeys in dangerous conditions
- Basic elements for rest and personal comfort to be created from scratch
- Contacts with supervisors that are less than satisfactory because of the taxing work in tense and stressful conditions
- The "rules of the game" may change in an unforeseen and unplanned manner

The relief worker's personal make-up and motivation may often lead them to:

- Be conscientious to the point of perfectionism. They may feel guilty and forget that the enormity of the task prevents them from "finishing" whatever they think they should do
- Forget that frustration in the work is likely to be the norm, which may lead to a loss in sense of humour and/or cynicism
- Experience "survivor's guilt" which may taint all compassionate action, bringing with it a feeling of personal failure.

How then can you adapt to those extreme conditions?

- First, know yourself and learn to observe your feelings and attitudes before trying to control your behaviour
- Remember that you have chosen to give of your time, your compassion and your generosity to alleviate human suffering – something you will not be able to do effectively if you were to become a "victim" yourself
- Remember that learning how to endure and adapt to abnormal and unfamiliar situations cannot be accomplished in a day
- Know that we all have, deep down, the unconscious belief that we, or others close to us, could be victims ourselves
- Learn to accept the intensity of one's own emotions as normal, in an abnormal situation
- Learn to understand the mechanisms of stress and its consequences. To live daily in the presence of human suffering provokes not only fatigue, but also mental confusion and fear. These signs of so-called "compassion fatigue" come very close to those of traumatic stress and PTSD.