Psychologically Equipped: Practical Recommendations to Better Prepare Humanitarian Professionals for Field Missions

White Paper Series No. 7

Life in the Field Series n. 2

The Breaking Point: Burnout, Mindfulness and Meaning.

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"Any idiot can face a crisis; it's this day-to-day living that wears you out." - Anton Chekhov
About the author

Alessandra Pigni I am a psychologist and consultant. I craft individual and organisational strategies to prevent burnout, ‘get unstuck’ and promote healthy work environments. My mantra is that ‘changing the world starts from within’. My vision is shared on www.mindfulnext.org which represents the evolution of the project once known as Mindfulness for NGOs.

This White Paper Series is based on a LinkedIn group discussion (in the Humanitarian Professionals Group) that I launched in May 2011 around a statement and a question: “Humanitarian aid workers are often psychologically unprepared for field missions. Any views on this from field and headquarters staff?”. Hundreds of comments keep pouring in, and the debate is still open. Contributions used in the White Paper Series are published anonymously to respect confidentiality.
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Introductory note

On a conscious level most people choose a career in aid to give purpose and meaning to their life. We want to be active and live out our ideals. For many the ethical component – in other words the idea of ‘making a difference’ – plays an important role. Work-life balance may not be exactly what most aid workers are after. Becoming an aid worker is a choice imbued with a sense of ‘mission’ – and it is hardly surprising that aid and humanitarian projects are still called ‘missions’ by several organisations. Emergency, long working hours and stress are part of the package. So why do so many burnout?

In this paper I will argue that when it comes to preventing burnout in aid workers, the idea of work-life balance is almost irrelevant. What is needed is an integrated approach, where work and life are one – because this is the case for frontline staff – and both include elements of care, support and meaning, which are the core ingredients of burnout prevention.

Burnout, not PTSD

Burnout syndrome – a state of mental, physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion, loss of meaning and faith in one’s ‘vocation’ - and not post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the main issue that affects most aid workers. Nevertheless the idea that humanitarians who suffer psychologically must be suffering from PTSD is a hard myth to dismantle. Over 40% of aid workers are at high risk of burnout, while ‘only’ between 5-10% are affected by PTSD (Loquercio et al., 2006).
I find the idea of work-life balance over-rated, and a sort of ‘myth’ for frontline professionals. A 9-5 office job may provide work-life balance, but a career in aid does not. By choosing humanitarian work we step out of the ‘office hours’ logic. So how do we protect ourselves in the field when there is little time for pausing, and no opportunities for sport or other activities beyond work?

In some non-emergency missions there may be space for ‘mini R&R’ breaks over the week-end. When this is not feasible, the ‘pendulum model’ can help (Ted Lankester, People in Aid HHR 2012). The model suggests that if we cannot have a balanced life during a mission, it is important to make sure that we get plenty of rest when we go home (for those who do have a home to return to, but this is material for another chapter). When time off comes, it is important to ‘change gear’, switch off or reduce the use of electronic devices - research shows how the need to be constantly online fuels anxiety, depression, and addiction (Dokoupl, 2012) – reconnect with loved ones, enjoy sports, nature, culture and invest in activities that are meaningful to us. As obvious as it may sound, it is not unusual for aid workers to take a quick rest after an assignment, and plunge straight into another mission, and for organisations to pressure their staff into postponing their annual leave or R&R, or into leaping immediately into a mission after another. Organisations that foster a culture of care are aware of how shortsighted such approach is.

How we work – the environment, the working hours, the support we give and receive, the organizational culture, etc., together with the purpose and meaning of our job – both contribute to preventing (or fueling) burnout.
People crave for meaning and action in this profession, not simply for a bit of work and a bit of rest. R&R and annual leave are a good burnout prevention measure, provided that our heart is still in the job. More often than not, burnout requires a deeper attention than having time off, and calls for a more radical lifestyle change. Let’s see why.

**Burnout is not simply ‘too much stress’**

Through my work as a psychologist and my research on humanitarian psychology, I read burnout not simply as a matter of too much stress, but rather as an existential issue, which has to do with **loss of meaning, and faith in one’s ‘calling’, combined with a disillusion towards the system in which one operates.**

Equating burnout with ‘too much stress’ represents a reductionist framework. Integrating the work of burnout expert Ayala Pines, the existential paradigm of Holocaust survivor and psychotherapist Viktor Frankl, and the work on mindfulness by Jon Kabat-Zinn, I see burnout as a ‘psycho-existential’ issue, in which stress plays a role. My take is that in order to prevent or treat burnout, the focus needs to be not only on reducing job stress and unrealistic work demands, but predominantly on **enhancing people’s sense that their work is important, and that their contribution is significant** (Pines and Keinan, 2005).

**The role of positive stress**

While stress can certainly lead to a breaking point when the demands are too high, it can also have a positive impact. Experts call **positive stress eustress**, meaning good stress (Chaskalson, 2012: p. 62). It is the kind of stress (something like a good challenge!) which allows us to be in **flow** (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and not succumb to the boredom of a job that is too easy and predictable.

Unfortunately most of the stress that aid workers experience has nothing to do with eustress and flow, but rather with headaches, poor sleep, back pain, tiredness, frustration, and poor interpersonal relations in the office. A recent research (Cardoso et al. 2012) shows how depression, anxiety and burnout are on the rise in humanitarian practitioners, and how agencies need to wake up to the occupational hazards of the lack of staff care, being willing to invest in pre-deployment psychological preparation, and in field support.

**Burnout and meaning**

For many, helping others is meant to give purpose and meaning. Humanitarian work holds the promise of being able to make a difference. But when in the field, it is not unusual for aid workers to see their idealism shattered. Burnout is the helper’s syndrome **par excellence**, and it ‘tends to affect people who enter the profession highly motivated and
idealistic, expecting their work to give their lives a sense of meaning’ (Pines and Aronson, 1988: p. 10). A great attitude, which at times holds unrealistic expectations, and ends up being crushed by the reality of a mission.

Burnout: the gap between ideals and reality

“He who has a why can endure any how” - Friedrich Nietzsche

Burnout looms at the horizon when

• We reduced our life to ‘all work and no play’, and
• When we are hit by a loud mismatch between the ideals we have when taking up a job, and the reality of the work.

We said that burnout is not simply too much stress and little rest. Burnout syndrome is like an alarm bell calling for new ways of being in the world. We may have to rethink our job, our inability to say no, our lack of boundaries, and lack of assertive communication. When we burnout we may need to take on different tasks or responsibilities, change job or go for a radical lifestyle change.

When suffering from burnout, chances are that no matter how much time we dedicate to a task, it will be lifeless. Relations with colleagues, family and friends often suffer and deteriorate. Most of all recovering from burnout means unlearning the ethics of perfectionism and sacrifice, and substituting it with an ethics of care for oneself, as well as for others.

Our motivation, the meaning we infuse to our work, and how we feel inside are not disconnected with what we bring to the table both in our professional, as well as personal life.
For most aid workers the personal and the professional are integrated and cannot simply be compartmentalised using the idea of work-life balance. Because work is life!

Let’s now look at some real-life scenarios provided by humanitarians active on the LinkedIn discussion. They will illustrate the importance of ongoing self-care and awareness, showing how when not mindful of our own psychological needs, the tipping point can completely catch us off-guard.

**Reaching a breaking-point in the field**

What emerged in the over 200 comments in the LinkedIn discussion on the psychological health of aid workers, is that most aid workers receive no psychological and emotional support from their agency. This lack of staff care within organisations leaves many professionals wounded and jaded by the field experience.

What happens when we are only depleted by our job, and we feel oppressed by the work environment? How do we feel inside? How to we relate to the local communities we aim to work with? Do we have ways to protect ourselves and prevent being psychologically overwhelmed by life in the field?

Healthy boundaries between personal and professional life are not a given in this line of work. Some self-awareness is required to bring to the field our healthy presence, and not simply our neurosis. This is only possible if we look after ourselves and develop a healthy relation with our profession – each has to find a personal refueling niche and make time for whatever energises us, but organisations have a duty to cultivate a culture of care for their staff. A humanitarian writes in the LinkedIn forum:

> ‘Even the most resilient people have a breaking point. I know aid workers who have endured horrendous situations and come out the other side seemingly unscathed. Then a small or fleeting occurrence will leave the same person psychologically damaged.

> My perception is that admitting one is feeling psychologically unwell is seen as a weakness - perhaps reflecting a broader social stigma towards mental ill health.

> I would like to see the day when aid workers can talk freely about how they feel and, as a consequence, get the help they need when they need it. This may also reduce the number of people who take up field-work to escape other problems in their lives.

> The trouble is it can be seen as a weakness [and] the "roughy toughy" image is one most try to keep. This normally ends up with problems being held close to ones chest and not spoken about, then they build up to the inevitable bursting point.

> It is a subject that can be invested in and one I think needs to be spoken about more openly to make people realise it is a problem even the hardiest of individual can face’.

A quick anecdote shared by another contributor to the discussion offers an excellent insight into the process of ‘losing it’:
‘In my experience’ she writes ‘the “breakdown” comes when something so utterly insignificant happens and you realize everything is just too much. I was eating lunch with a colleague in Iraq when she dropped her plastic fork on the floor and burst out crying. It was no trouble at all to get a replacement fork, but at that moment you have the “why can’t anything ever be easy out here” moment!’.

Another aid worker describes how when everything is just too much, we lose sight of why we are in this line of work, we feel confused and overwhelmed and we risk breaking up suddenly and unexpectedly:

‘I witnessed a “snapping moment... a guy fastening his bootlace when it snapped as he pulled on it... he just broke down and cried... a big guy too, not someone you would think would do such a thing. Just goes to show that press the right buttons and we can all be at the mercy of stress’.

In order to be touched, but not crushed by events in the field, an aid worker goes on to comment that it’s helpful to have ‘the tools to get to know oneself [...] to know when to stop’ and learn ‘how to look after yourself [...] knowing when it is time to rest, and being aware of your limits: We all have a breaking point’.

Burnout is much more likely to catch us by surprise if we have put aside all the meaningful and nurturing activities for a job that has lost vision and has become a slog. The model of the ‘exhaustion funnel’ offers a useful explanation of how we get ourselves in a rut by only attending to depleting activities.

**The exhaustion funnel: aid work, burnout and lessons from mindfulness**

“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet” - R. N. Remen

In my daily contact with people involved in aid work, I see disillusion, disappointment and cynicism. I repeatedly come across signs of physical, mental, spiritual and emotional exhaustion. I find that there is often shame around it, maybe sprinkled with “self-cynicism”.

**Many burnout without knowing it.** In is not unusual that the lifestyle that has driven people for long – the frontline expat lifestyle – has become empty of any joy and meaning. Still many have the urge to carry on, to keep up appearances, trying hard not shatter one’s self image.

**Burnout leads us to feel irreplaceable.** We feel as if it is up to us to carry the whole responsibility for the good outcome of a project.

In the midst of emergencies, there is a sense that our personal wellbeing and good mental health are not worth looking after, and we become ashamed of expressing our needs.

Some consider the idea of any kind of staff care indulging, an attitude reinforced by a ‘super-humanitarian’ culture which disapproves of rest, support, boundaries, and personal needs. All is to be sacrificed for the mission. A funny paradox when there is an obvious and direct
correlation between our own psychological health and the quality of our work. No-one will benefit from our presence and ‘help’ if we are unable to weave simple moments of self-care into our daily life.

In the book *Mindfulness. Finding Peace in a Frantic World*, Prof. Mark Williams and Denny Penman discuss the idea of the ‘exhaustion funnel’ to describe how we are pulled into the dark pit of burnout when we fail to care for our own psychological and emotional needs. The concept was developed by Prof. Marie Åsberg, expert on burnout, at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm.

![The process of burnout, from Williams and Penman, Mindfulness (p. 211, Paktus 2011)](image)

The top circle represents how we are when we lead a balanced life. For humanitarians it seems more appropriate to refer to a meaningful life, as balance is often not part of the deal in the field, especially in emergency situations. ‘As things get busier’, Williams and Penman notice, ‘many of us tend to give things up to focus on what seems “important”. The circle narrows, illustrating the narrowing of our lives. But if the stress is still there, we give up more – and more. The circles narrow further. Notice that very often, the very first things we give up are those that nourish us the most but seem “optional”. The result is that we are increasingly left with only work or other stressors that often deplete our resources, and nothing to replenish or nourish us’ (Williams and Penman, 2011: p. 212). Burnout is then the result.

The authors highlight how it is often committed and conscientious people, and ‘those whose level of self-confidence is closely dependent on their work-performance’ who are likely to burnout. In aid work many are highly committed, and may feel there is no room for self-care amidst conflict, poverty, or natural disasters. The reality is that we all need respite to nourish and refuel. Bringing mindfulness into our daily life can help to prevent burnout, and bring awareness to what is meaningful and nourishing for us. Mindfulness represents a way to relate to difficult relations or events in a different way, rather than following old automatic patterns. It is not just a set of techniques but rather a way of approaching life’s ups and downs.
The exhaustion funnel model suggests that ‘when life is all work and no play’, there can be no other outcome but burnout, which is the wise response of our body and mind. This is where the concept of **post-burnout growth** (Pigni, 2011) gives us hope, showing that there is life beyond burnout.

**Post-burnout growth**

Overcoming burnout requires addressing the death of an ‘old me’, and the necessity – for our own health, happiness and wellbeing, as well as for engaging with others in more effective ways – to rebuild what has been suffocated by perfectionism, extremely high expectations, unhealthy sense of duty, the misperception of being irreplaceable, and a lifestyle that lacks joy, fun, meaning and passion.

**Mindfulness and burnout**

Mindfulness is a helpful approach when dealing with burnout (including preventing it), because it is about self-awareness and about recognizing our needs, before we plunge into helping others. When we are able to recognise what matters to us, we can make choices which will reduce stress, diminish our ‘perfectionist’s anxiety’, and allow for a sense of purpose. Evidence shows how mindfulness can help to go beyond the guilt and shame of looking after ourselves, teaching how self-care is an intelligent rather than indulging approach (Jon Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Helping and leading others from a place of ‘healthy empathy’, rather than ‘neurotic empathy’ is a skill we can all benefit from.

**We need to unlearn what we have learned**

Life in the field requires creativity and meaning. A Sri Lankan aid worker writes: ‘In a new field [we] should have flexibility to unlearn what is not applicable, learn and adapt to new challenges’. Like Luke Skywalker in Star Wars, aid workers too are on a journey, some are at the beginning, full of ideals and hopes, others mid-career still fulfilled, some looking for a way out.

I’m reminded that we are driven to our profession by conscious motivations (doing good, exploring the world, making a difference), as well as unconscious motivations (resolve personal issues, healing oneself, running away from home). This is why meaning counts, and
we are asked to be aware of where we are on our journey, both as a means to look after ourselves, but also as a duty towards those we wish to benefit.

I listen to the stories of people who say ‘I’ve always wanted to work in the field and now I’m disillusioned’, ‘Things cannot go on like this’, ‘I am exhausted’. As tough as it may sounds, burnout often helps in the process: one is simply unable to carry on as before. When the tide gets tough, we need to adapt and embrace one of the biggest and most interesting challenges: reinventing ourselves. This ability plays a role in burnout prevention, as well as in ‘post-burnout growth’. But first we must learn to stop. A truly scary thought for many of us constantly on the move.

Conclusion: going beyond the ‘super-humanitarian’ culture

Colleagues may pass cynical comments and mock those who are promoting self-care for themselves and others. Some may disapprove by assuming a moral authority based on suffering and sacrifice.

Hiding behind yet another emergency, some may sneer at the idea of fostering a culture of learning and care within the organization.

Some will say only wealthy UN agencies can afford such luxury.

Truth is, burnout prevention and care for ourselves and others starts from each one of us. Staff care is not made solely by psychologists, counsellors and coaches. Professionals can aspire to be treated according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: ‘Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay’ (Article 24). Building healthy and resilient organisations is an ongoing process of learning and care, which goes beyond stress management workshops. More on this in the next chapter of the White Paper Series.

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Next in the white paper series No. 8: Building a Culture of Care and Learning within Organisations