

# Stress Management for Emergency Responders

## Introduction

*[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.*

Hi. I'm Dr. Leslie Snider with the Antares Foundation. In conjunction with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we have developed this program series to promote the well-being and functioning of emergency responders and humanitarian aid workers through good stress management systems and practices.

This is a series of four programs on stress management for individuals, teams, and agencies working in emergency and humanitarian aid settings. This series examines sources of stress at each level and what individuals, team leaders, and agency management can do to reduce stress and its negative impacts on staff and the mission. This series is geared toward individuals and agencies working in various crisis settings. These include complex emergencies, such as post-war zones or refugee camps; natural disasters, such as the Asian tsunami or Hurricane Katrina; man-made disasters, such as chemical spills; and disease outbreaks in various parts of the world. We will use the term "individual" or "responder" to refer to emergency responders, humanitarian aid workers, and personnel providing technical assistance in these settings.

Why is this issue important? We first need to acknowledge that the stresses and dangers of emergency and humanitarian aid work are unique. Second, our programs are only as good as the people who deliver them. The well-being of individuals and teams is paramount to the success of the mission. This last point is about risk reduction for agencies. If we send people into emergency settings, or if we, as individuals, decide to do this work, then we have a responsibility to understand and deliberately act to manage stress and function at our best – for ourselves, our team, and for the people we are serving.

Let's take a moment to look at the realities of what this type of stress means. Several end-of-deployment studies show: up to 30 to 50 percent of humanitarian aid workers experience stress-related problems sufficient to interfere with their work<sup>1</sup>. And in a study of returned responders, 20 percent reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, 30 percent moderate to high levels of depression, and almost half significant symptoms of post-traumatic stress<sup>2</sup>.

Another reality of emergency and humanitarian aid work is exposure to critical incidents. Critical incidents are extreme or traumatic events out of the realm of normal, human experience. The humanitarian sector is no longer protected space, and over the years, there has been a deterioration in the security situation for aid workers and decreasing respect for their work and life.

Stress is an inevitable part of humanitarian aid work. In the four programs in this series, we will discuss practical strategies for individual responders, team leaders, and the agency. The overall goal of this series is to ensure the well-being and optimal functioning of responders and the success of your mission. We hope you enjoy this series.

For further information and to download resources such as “Managing Stress in Humanitarian Aid Workers: Guidelines for Good Practice,” see the Antares Foundation website: [www.antaresfoundation.org](http://www.antaresfoundation.org).

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[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.

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<sup>1</sup> C Eriksson, "Stress in Humanitarian Aid Workers," paper presented at conference *Managing Stress in Humanitarian Aid Workers*, Antares Foundation, Amsterdam, September 26, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> C Eriksson et al, Occupational stress, trauma, and adjustment in expatriate humanitarian aid workers, *Stress and Trauma Handbook*, (ed. J. Fawcett), Monrovia, CA: World Vision International, 2003.