

Psychological Preparation for Hardship Assignments and Missions

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**Staff Welfare Section
Staff Health and Welfare Service/DHRM**

Background

As of September 2012, out of 8148 staff members, 45% is working in the D&E locations (641 international and 3055 national staff). There is also a sizable contingent of staff on temporary assignments and as well as UN Volunteers and other affiliate workforce reaching an additional 1000 persons serving in the same locations. UNHCR's duty of care is to provide special care for these colleagues in order to safeguard their health and psychological welfare but also to ensure operational effectiveness and efficiency.

A pilot project on psychological preparation for colleagues assigned for the first time to a hardship location was conducted from September 2011 to March 2012. The process involved one telephone contact and self-study prior to departure, and, three telephone contacts after the departure at one, three and six months periods. The interviews conducted with the participants in January 2012 indicated that the participants appreciated that kind of contact and found it useful. A particular suggestion concerned scheduling of appointments with a suggestion to have two contacts prior to the deployment and 1-2 contacts following the deployment which will be addressed by this project.

The Staff Welfare Section in DHRM is launching a year-long follow-up project, which is described in this paper.

What is psychological preparation?

Psychological preparation is a process of tuning person's inner resources to the coming situation. A psychologically prepared person expects certain challenges, has an idea of the potential psychological impact of such challenges, knows his/her own reactions to such challenges and is familiar with his/her own inner resources and where and how to seek support when needed. In the context of assignments to hardship locations, these challenges include:

- Working under continuous pressure
- Lack of privacy
- Working and living in the contexts of security threats and/or exposure to human suffering
- Separation from family and social networks
- Lack of conditions that favor a healthy lifestyle

While some aspects of the psychological preparation can be standardized and used for all newly recruited persons to hardship locations, the preparation process has to take into account individual differences at all levels: personality, past personal and professional experiences, individual coping skills and cultural background including values and norms. Individualized contacts between a colleague and a Staff Welfare Officer can match this requirement and a staff member could consider the process of psychological preparation as an opportunity for an open discussion and a personal reflection about his or her readiness for the coming hardship assignment. The areas of focus are:

- Assessing the past experiences that might contribute to their resilience/vulnerability
- Assessing their current level of stress, identifying personal resources and learning new coping skills
- Familiarizing with the sources of stress at their destination
- Identifying potential risks for the person
- Establishing a self-care plan
- Ensuring that the person is familiar with the UNHCR's support services

The paragraphs below focus on elements relevant to the psychological preparation for all colleagues assigned for 6 months and longer and for colleagues traveling on a mission to D&E location for 1 month and longer. The process of psychological preparation for the newly recruited national staff and the families will be referred to in separated chapters of this document.

The psychological preparation programme is coordinated with the induction programme and other briefing processes as well as with mentoring process (including First 100 Days programme).

Trigger

Reassignment or recruitment letter addressed to the colleagues assigned to D&E locations will include an instruction to the concerned colleagues to establish a contact with the designated Staff Welfare Officer prior to their departure. During the first year, it is the responsibility of the staff member to establish the first contact.

In addition, the medical clearance form will contain a reminding note for the staff with the text: “Ensure that you have contacted the designated Staff Welfare Officer for your psychological preparation”.

Colleagues traveling for a mission to D&E locations for one month and longer will be asked to contact the designated Staff Welfare Officer by the Admin Officer of the operation.

Designation of the Staff Welfare Officers

Each Staff Welfare Officer has his or her area of responsibility as follows:

Staff Welfare Contact	Countries
Dubravka Suzic suzic@unhcr.org	All representatives and Chiefs of Missions Back up for colleagues
Misko Mimica mimica@unhcr.org	Algeria, Egypt, Georgia, Iraq, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Palestinian Territory, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Syria, Uzbekistan, Yemen
Staff Welfare Officer – Social Worker, HQ	Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, Panama, Venezuela, JPOs
Kamran Ahmad ahmadk@unhcr.org	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Papa New Guinea, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor Leste,
Achille Kodo kodo@unhcr.org	Chad, Congo, DRC, Gabon
Lilian Ewagata ewagata@unhcr.org	Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Kenya, Somalia, S. Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Christopher Raymond raymond@unhcr.org	Benin, Burkina Fasso, Cameroon, CAR, Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, Western Sahara

It is the responsibility of each Staff Welfare Officers to maintain an up-to-date list of D&E locations in the operations under their coverage and keep themselves abreast of the living and working conditions and other staff welfare related issues there relevant to the preparation process.

In case that a colleague for whatever reason would prefer to have a contact with another Staff Welfare Officer rather than a designated one, this could be arranged through the Staff Welfare Assistant.

Participants

This program targets all colleagues on their way to a D&E location regardless of the years of service with UNHCR or their experience with hardship assignments. The staff in the following categories will be asked to participate in this program:

- All international staff, in professional and FS categories, reassigned or appointed to a regular position in a D&E duty station.
- All staff temporarily assigned to a D&E duty station in an international or FS capacity
- International UNVs or international UNOPs staff

Officers will give priority considerations to colleagues assigned or deployed to operations in hostile environments¹.

The program will not include the Emergency Roster members given that their psychological preparation is done during the WEM. Colleagues supporting UNHCR operations in D&E locations on secondment from other organisations, retirees and consultants will be informed about the Staff Welfare Section and designated Staff Welfare Officer through email.

Colleagues not included in any of the above categories but who would nonetheless like to benefit from this individualized measure, will be most welcome to contact the designated Staff Welfare Officer and will be attended to.

Psychological preparation process and protocols

The process of psychological preparation consists of one-on-one phone session(s) with a Staff Welfare Officer during which a colleague has an opportunity to review his/her coping skills and challenges in the context of previous experiences and upcoming assignment. Each such contact is based on a protocol (attached) with a goal of making this measure as practical as possible for the colleagues. Each conversation will be highly adjusted to the needs, experience and profile of each individual. The process will be supported by practical reading references.

The design of this intervention foresees that colleagues newly joining UNHCR, and/or UNHCR staff reassigned to D&E duty stations for the first time will have one phone session prior and another one upon their arrival in the duty station. UNHCR staff, who have already served in D&E duty stations as well as those who have already been through the programme of psychological preparation before, will have a single session prior to their departure. In all cases, a need for additional contacts and counseling including referrals will be assessed and offered as necessary.

Consultants and deployees on secondment from other organisations will receive the resilience related briefing material by email and for the time being no sessions are foreseen unless requested.

¹ The list of the operations in hostile environments is regularly updated in consultation with the FSS currently including but not limited to: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Sudan (Darfur), South Sudan, Mali.

Confidentiality and data recording

The above conversations will remain confidential under the UNSSCG Guidelines of Confidentiality for staff/stress counsellors.

The Staff Welfare Officers will record the meetings that took place (without detailing the content of the sessions) in the MSRP Workforce management module accessible only to the Staff Welfare Officers. That will enable the Officers to determine the type of preparation necessary. UNVs, UNOPS staff, consultants and other affiliate workforce will be registered in a separate database until MSRP will offer the possibility of registering the non-staff.

Monitoring of the implementation rate

During this first year, the responsibility to initiate the contact is left with the staff member. In some situations, for example, when assignments concern operations in emergency or in hostile environments, the designated Staff Welfare Officers will proactively contact the colleagues concerned. In all cases, quarterly reviews of the MSRP reassignment data and the information of deployment rosters will show the rate of implementation and the needed adjustments will take place in order to increase the implementation rate.

Preparation of national staff

The program of psychological preparation as described above is intended for the international colleagues in any contractual arrangement with a focus of preparation for the assignment in a particular operational environment. The support to the national staff as means of preparation is also important but it should be designed differently to recognize the fact of their familiarity with their own country. The psychological preparation should focus on awareness of stress, trauma and resilience as well as the staff support mechanisms, including grievance mechanisms in UNHCR.

The process of psychological preparation of national staff has to be complemented by an induction programme, Code of Conduct session and detailed admin briefing pertaining their contractual status, benefits and entitlements.

All of the above should be facilitated through the periodic group activities ensuring that newly joined staff have an access to the relevant information within three months from their start of service. The individual sessions will be facilitated as requested. The Staff Welfare Officer will be responsible for organizing these sessions on stress/trauma and resilience and staff support mechanisms in UNHCR.

Attachment 1

Table of actions involved in the psychological preparation

Staff category	Action taken by	Type of action
JPO	PAPS	Informs the JPOs about psychological preparation by the assignment memo
	JPO Focal Point	In preparation of the induction programme for JPO's, the JPO Unit makes an appointment with the Staff Welfare Section
	Staff Welfare Officer, HQ	E-mails self-study material prior to the first meeting Conducts face to face meeting applying the protocol for the first contact Schedules and conducts the second contact one month following the assignment
First time joining UNHCR (staff and UNVs, TAs)	PAPS	Requests the colleagues to contact the designated Staff Welfare Officer by the assignment memo
	Staff member/UNV	Contacts the designated SWO for an appointment
	Designated Staff Welfare Officer	E-mails self-study material prior to the first meeting Conducts face to face meeting applying the protocol for the first contact Schedules and conducts the second contact one month following the assignment
Staff who have already been in the hardship duty stations with UNHCR	PAPS	Requests the colleagues to contact the designated Staff Welfare Officer by the reassignment memo
	Staff member/UNV	Contacts the designated Staff Welfare Officer for an appointment
	Designated Staff Welfare Officer	Organizes the first contact and applies the protocol for the single contact prior to departure
Emergency roster (WEM):		No action required.
Secondees, deployees, consultants, retirees	Roster managers and consultant focal points	Informs the SWS of the arriving secondees, deployees and consultants prior to their arrival
	Staff Welfare Section	Contacts by email the arriving secondees, deployees and consultants prior to their arrival with the written material and information about the in-house resources for staff support

Attachment 2

Psychological preparation – protocols for individual sessions

1. Protocol for two-contacts preparation

a. First one-on-one session

The session will take place prior to the deployment. It is highly interactive and will follow the participant and his/her needs. During this session, the counsellor will:

- Explain the process of psychological preparation and inform about confidentiality
- Assess quickly person's background and get a sense of the style of psychosocial functioning
- Review the self-study material and discuss the most salient points for the participants ensuring to cover
 - o most challenging situations experienced and how s/he handled that
 - o coping skills used in such situations
 - o sources of psychosocial support that the participant has
 - o maladaptive coping mechanisms including substance abuse
- Check the information that the participant already knows about the duty station and supplement the information (including the cultural aspects, working in multicultural teams, living conditions, general team dynamics)
- Help person to identify the potential stressors (i.e. security incident, separation from the family, culture shock) and discuss the self-care plan and coping mechanisms to use
- Inform the colleague about the purpose and existence of the PEP starter kit
- Assess the needs for further readings and discussions
- Agree on the time for the next session

The session will last between 60-90 minutes. The rapport established in this session will be the basis for the future contacts. The content of this session is strictly confidential. The session finishes by an arrangement for the next session. Additional readings (i.e. on culture) might be recommended as necessary.

b. Second one-on-one session

This session takes place 4 weeks following the reassignment and will focus on the way the participant is adjusting to the new situation. The counsellor will:

- Assess the quality of initial experience of the UNHCR operation:
 - o Reception by the colleagues/managers
 - o Feeling of belonging to the team
 - o Understanding the role and tasks and feeling comfortable asking questions and finding answers
 - o Experiences of working in and with different cultures
 - o Life after 5 pm – established routines, stress management strategies
 - o Sources of social support in the duty station and contacts with sources of support outside
 - o Handling separation from personal social network (including family)
- Check on the biggest challenges for the participant encountered and how s/he dealt with them
- Get the participant to self-assess the level of stress
- Coach the participant in how to keep the level of stress under control
- Verify if they confirmed the existence of the PEP Starter Kits
- Inform about the possibility for debriefing and keep the possibility for further contact open.

The session might last for about 45-60 minutes.

2. A single session preparation conversation protocol

The session will take place prior to the deployment. It is highly interactive and will follow the participant and his/her needs. It will acknowledge the previous experience of the colleague in UNHCR hardship operations. During this session, the counsellor will:

- Explain the process of psychological preparation and emphasize confidentiality
- Assess previous experience in hardship operations
 - o the most challenging experience(s)
 - o the greatest sources of stress for the person
 - o personal limits
 - o experience with traumatic situations
 - o dealing with family separation or separation from the social circle
 - o coping mechanisms and self-care
 - o maladaptive coping
- Assess the needs for psychosocial support
- Check the information that the participant already knows about the duty station and supplement the information (including the cultural aspects, working in multicultural teams, living conditions, general team dynamics)
- Help person to identify the potential stressors and self-care plan and agree on the framework
- Assess current family needs
- Check the understanding and the knowledge of the PEP Starter Kit and inform of the custodian in a location.
- Assess the needs for further readings and discussions
- Inform about the possibility for post-deployment debriefing and keep the possibility for further contact open

The session will last between 60-90 minutes. The rapport established in this session will be the basis for the future contacts. The content of this session is strictly confidential. The session finishes by an arrangement for the next session. Additional readings (i.e. on culture) might be recommended as necessary.

NB: the presented framework of three protocols is a reminder for the Staff Welfare Officer rather than a guide for a structured interview. The SWO should heavily rely on the input by the colleague focusing on establishing rapport that will allow the colleague to open up and meaningfully explore their experiences and their readiness. Establishment of a self-care plan in the first contact is very important. The Staff Welfare Officers should be prepared to describe the self-care exercises and “demonstrate” them over the phone.