

**PSYCHOLOGICAL  
SUPPORT:  
A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR  
MÉDECINS DU MONDE  
ACTORS**



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<b>PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT AT MEDECINS DU MONDE.</b>	p.1
Different categories of stress	p.2
Basic stress	p.3
Cumulative stress	p.3
Acute stress and traumatic stress	p.4
Vicarious trauma	p.5
Signs not to be ignored...	p.6
<b>EACH MOMENT, A SOLUTION.</b>	p.7
Expatriates : Before, during and after a humanitarian mission	p.7
Unpaid volunteers	p.7
On MdM chapters in France or at HQ	p.8
National staff	p.8
Exceptional cases: traumatic events	p.9
Different situations require different responses	p.10
Team meetings	p.10
Analysis of practice	p.10
Supervision	p.10
Psychological support	p.11
Debriefing	p.11
Personal approach	p.11
<b>WHO TO CONTACT FOR INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT? WHAT TO DO?</b>	p.13



## PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT AT MEDECINS DU MONDE

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Médecins du Monde is mindful of the well-being of its team members, whether they work at the organisation's headquarters or on its France and international missions. Indeed, as people tend to spend most of their week at work, well-being in the workplace is of the utmost importance.

MdM runs operational development programmes and emergency response operations aimed at facilitating access to health care for the most vulnerable. Our working environment is very demanding and calls for a high level of adaptability. Just like in any other organisation, there can be professional and organisational difficulties at MdM (management issues, heavy workloads, lack of resources, closures, etc.). Sometimes there are problems related to human resources, such as internal conflicts, understaffing, poor team dynamics, etc. Moreover, our field teams are constantly exposed to the extreme precariousness in which our beneficiary populations live. The people arriving on our programmes have complex life stories to tell. These can be distressing and require very careful

handling. And on top of all this, there are security issues in the field which can cause additional stress.

Each mission, each programme and each service has a defined framework of action and each team member has to determine his or her own limits within this framework.

It goes without saying that we must take care of our beneficiaries, but we must also take care of our teams. We need to manage stress at MdM to protect everyone who works for us and ensure their individual well-being, but also to guarantee the smooth-running of the missions we implement for and with our beneficiaries, whether from headquarters or in the field.

It is important not to trivialise or relativise your own difficulties by comparing them to the "much more legitimate" situations of distress encountered in the field in France and abroad.

The Career Development Department is there to help you cope with these professional and personal issues

***But what is stress exactly?*** How does it manifest itself? We all have periods of ill-being or anxiety, but sometimes our mental health can deteriorate without us realising.

## DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF STRESS

Stress is a normal physiological reaction that enables us to mobilise our body and mind and react rapidly to new situations. We are faced with stressful situations at some level every day, such as being late for an appointment, for example, or getting bad news, taking an exam, having too much work to do, etc. But we are neither physiologically or psychologically capable of coping with situations of stress over prolonged periods.

**Being stressed does not just affect our “head”, it can also generate physical, emotional, cognitive, relational and behavioural problems.**

Managers play a key role in managing their teams’ priorities and must be attentive to each member’s well-being. If necessary, they can mobilise the resources needed to help them overcome any difficulties.

## BASIC STRESS

This is the underlying stress of day-to-day living and can come from a variety of sources (emotional, individual, familial, etc.). We can feel this kind of stress when taking up a new position, for example. It tends to decrease in the weeks following a change as we adapt, get our bearings and familiarise ourselves with the tools there to help us.

## CUMULATIVE STRESS

When exposure to stress factors is constant or ongoing, our body and mind become exhausted. The origin of this stress may or may not be professional. When it is linked to our work environment, it is known as “burnout” or occupational exhaustion. It builds up gradually, which means it can be treated when the first signs and symptoms appear and before the person’s psychological distress becomes incapacitating. **Sometimes we do not realise that we are affected by this type of stress, so it is important to be vigilant and listen to what our body is telling us. If you feel the need to talk about your difficulties, you can always contact your career officer.**

Here are the symptoms associated with cumulative stress or burnout:

- Physical manifestations: fatigue, intestinal disorders, headaches, tight muscles, insomnia, loss of appetite, etc.
- Emotional manifestations: irritability, sadness, anxiety, frustration, feelings of guilt, diminished motivation, boredom, feelings of emptiness, questioning of values, loss of positive sense of self, etc.
- Cognitive manifestations: forgetfulness, inability to concentrate, etc.
- Relational manifestations: withdrawal, anger, lack of patience with others, etc.
- Behavioural manifestations: avoidance, non-productive hyperactivity, heavy drinking or smoking, drug-taking, etc.

## ACUTE STRESS OR TRAUMATIC STRESS

They are much more serious and context-related. This type of stress occurs when someone's life is in danger or they witness acts of violence, such as death, serious injuries, sexual violence (experienced directly or indirectly; concerning family or close friends; repeated exposure), or natural disasters. When someone does not have the resources to cope with traumatic events such as this, symptoms of acute and post-traumatic stress can set in and

**rapid treatment is needed to reduce them.**

This type of event is not confined to contexts of crisis and conflict; they can happen to anyone, anywhere - even in an environment considered to be "stable".

**MdM offers psychological support to any team members affected by a traumatic event. De façon beaucoup plus sévère et contextuelle, nous pouvons être confrontés au stress aigu et/ou stress post-traumatique.**

Acute stress can appear a few days after a traumatic event and persist for up to a month afterwards.

Symptoms include:

- Intrusive recollections, recurrent dreams about the event, flashbacks, etc.
- Negative mood
- Derealisation or depersonalisation
- Avoidance of places, people, recollections, etc.
- Hypervigilance, sleep disorders, limited attention span, being easily startled, etc.



Post-traumatic stress disorder can only be diagnosed one month after a traumatic event.

There are four main groups of symptoms for PTSD:

- Intrusive recollections, recurrent dreams about the event, flashbacks, etc.
- Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event (places, people, recollections, emotions, etc.)
- Feelings of detachment, guilt, negative changes in beliefs, diminished interest, etc.
- Irritability, hypervigilance, insomnia, limited attention span, being easily startled, etc.

## VICARIOUS TRAUMA

As helping professionals, our team traumatised people, team members may also be affected by experience symptoms of depression or compassion fatigue. Beneficiaries and vicarious trauma, especially if they do not patients frequently recount traumatic events in which they or their loved ones have time to recover away from work or are not offered an opportunity to discuss have been in mortal danger (major what they are feeling in a professional psychological distress, physical or sexual environment. violence, torture, traumatic grief, etc.). As a result of repeated exposure to

## Signs not to be ignored...

- You feel more than usually strong empathy for the programme's beneficiaries.
- You have trouble concentrating; you brood over thoughts; you are dissatisfied with your work or have lost interest.
- You have lost your motivation, or you feel that you are not doing enough.
- You are becoming distrustful of your colleagues or you are withdrawing and cutting yourself off from them by avoiding eating with them, for example.
- You have lost confidence in the organisation.
- You have lost self-esteem; you feel guilty easily.
- You are more pessimistic and/or more cynical than usual.
- You are particularly tired and you don't feel any better when you wake up which is affecting your physical and mental state.
- You feel sad.
- You have somatic disorders that are not getting any better (stomach cramps, back pains, itchy skin, etc.).

If you feel you are showing some of these signs, discuss your situation with your line-manager or your career officer who will help you find ways of managing your stress or organise some psychological support, if you think it would help.

**We all react differently to stress.** Two people can experience the same event in completely different ways, and reactions can also differ according to the period in

which an event is experienced. **Given the number of variables affecting how individuals react to stress, we need to be heedful of the well-being of everyone working for MDM.**

And lastly, it is important to remember that stress is a normal reaction to abnormal situations.

*MdM's teams include salaried staff and volunteers in France, salaried staff and volunteers on our international programmes and national staff recruited in the field.*

## EACH MOMENT, A SOLUTION.

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### Expatriates staff: Before, during and after a humanitarian mission

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Preparing for departure, working on a field mission or returning home at the end of a mission are periods that can be potentially destabilising for everyone.

Isolation, being away from your family and friends, a different culture and climate, constant exposure to situations of extreme precarity, security risks and heavy workloads are all stress factors that can accumulate and undermine your psychological equilibrium. It is essential to listen to what your body is telling you and look out for signs that all is not well.

The availability of psychological support is mentioned during the pre-departure briefing. It can be provided remotely while people are in the field or when they return

from their mission. If you feel the need for this kind of support, talk about it with your career officer during one of your regular updates. We guarantee the confidentiality of these discussions and will ensure you are referred to our network of professionals.

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### Unpaid volunteers

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Voluntary work can make you aware of your own limitations, especially if you underestimate the effects that regular exposure to difficult situations such as street patrols, exposure to extreme precarity, traumatic experiences and severe distress can have on you. It is important to talk to the mission about its activities and mandate to make sure you are equipped to cope with destabilising situations. You should also remember that MdM's mandate has a limited focus. If you

are unable to maintain enough distance, you may start to see this mandate as overly restrictive and lose sight of the fact that there are other organisations on the ground providing other services.

Volunteers can also benefit from psychological support. If you are interested, contact the Human Resources Directorate at HQ directly or via the mission's general coordinator or programme coordinator.

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### [On MdM chapters in France or at HQ](#)

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The context in which we work offers us little long-term visibility for our actions. As a result, we have to be highly adaptable and versatile, and there are times when our workloads are particularly heavy. Although managers do their best to ensure their teams' equilibrium and well-being, people can sometimes be so caught up in their work that they push themselves to the point of exhaustion.

MdM's career officers will refer any employees who express the need to our network of psychologists and psychiatrists. Alternatively, anyone wishing to make

more confidential arrangements can contact our complementary health insurance company, which reimburses up to 225€ a year for "alternative" medical care, including sessions with a psychologist.

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### [National staff](#)

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Psychological support is included in every mission's medical policy. Missions endeavour to identify national psychologists with whom they can develop a relationship of trust, as the cultural aspects of stress and trauma are very important, each culture perceiving death or danger differently. However, if there are no competent resources in the country concerned, HQ Human Resources can send out foreign psychologists with knowledge of the country's culture. Their objective will be to carry out prevention work with staff and equip them to cope with stress more effectively.

For example, one of our psychologists goes out to Iraq every three months to help the teams manage the psycho-social risks linked to their professional activity

and the effects of the current crisis on their mental health.

In CAR, two psychologists provide regular support and training to the national teams on debriefing and stress management techniques.

In Yemen, HQ Human Resources have identified two Arabic-speaking psychologists who provide remote psychological support to help staff cope with the on-going crisis situation.

The general coordinator in Ivory Coast has found a coach who helps the national teams cope with their difficulties by organising a discussion forum similar to an analysis of practice workshop, as this form of support is better suited to cultural perceptions of mental health.

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### Exceptional cases: traumatic events

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In the event of a traumatic event affecting professional activity (natural disaster, security incident, kidnapping, etc.), and wherever this event may occur (France or abroad), HQ Human Resources Directorate will take all necessary measures to ensure a quick and appropriate response for the people affected. Pre-identified psychologists can be on the ground very rapidly to provide support to the teams' specific needs, working in liaison with the relevant managers or general coordinators.

These psychologists usually use debriefing techniques and often teach people relaxation techniques (like after the earthquake in Nepal in April 2015 or in Nigeria in 2018).

*How can we ensure well-being at work and handle those periods where people are at their most vulnerable?*

## DIFFERENT SITUATIONS REQUIRE DIFFERENT RESPONSES.

But whatever the situation, confidentiality is essential.

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### Analysis of practice

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### Team meetings

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These are opportunities for discussing cases or situations without outside assistance. The objective is to share information, discuss successes or difficulties and look for solutions that satisfy the team. They are also useful for managing priorities when workloads become too heavy which helps reduce the stress inherent in the situation. Although they should not be too frequent, managers should make the most of this kind of meeting to foster dialogue between team members.

These are peer discussion groups aimed at improving beneficiary management. The objective is to train teams using practical exercises that allow each participant to get a clearer picture of how he or she operates and improve his or her professional practices. Analysis of practice is often used by professions with a big relational component. Sessions are run by a facilitator with experience of analysis of practice and managing discussion groups.

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### Supervision

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**Team meetings are organised at the discretion of the services concerned.**

We talk of supervision when a resource person supervises the therapeutic relationship aspects of a colleague's

activity. The idea is to reflect on situations encountered in a professional context and on their impact on the professional concerned, with input from an experienced supervisor. By sharing their knowledge, supervisors help their colleagues to comprehend the difficulties encountered in the therapeutic relationship and the emotional impact of constantly coming into contact with other people's suffering. Supervision can be one-to-one or in small groups.

Some France and International missions have already put supervision in place for their teams or use an analysis of practice approach on a more occasional basis.

**Whether for supervision or analysis of practice, Career Development Department can help you identify suitable therapists.**

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## Psychological support

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Professional situations can affect people's mood and have a destabilising effect at a more personal level. In such cases, a short period of individual psychological support can provide an opportunity to speak freely

and find ways of managing these situations more easily.

From January to December 2017, Career Development Department organised around 70 individual confidential consultations.

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## Debriefing

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This is a post-immediate therapeutic intervention following a traumatic event. One-to-one or group sessions are carried out by a professional trained in debriefing. The objective is to help the people concerned by the event to talk it through step-by-step in order to reduce their distress and prevent psychological disorders from developing.

MdM mainly uses debriefing in the event of a critical incident in the field.

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## Personal approaches

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During periods of ill-being, it is important to listen to what your body is telling you. Physical activity and relaxation methods

can help, and taking time to relax, switch off from work and do what you like doing is crucial. Talking to friends or family at difficult times is also a means of verbalising your problems and gaining some perspective.

**Never let your out-of-work activities go!**



## WHO TO CONTACT FOR INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT? WHAT TO DO?

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Career Development Department has upgraded MdM's network of freelance psychologists and psychiatrists in France and abroad. They all have knowledge of international aid work and multiculturalism issues, as well as experience of managing psychosocial risks or psychological trauma. Different therapeutic approaches are available to respond effectively and appropriately to the range of problems encountered. This network is made of multilingual therapists with a range of theoretical specialities.

MdM will cover the cost of up to four psychological support sessions a year, if

these sessions are not reimbursed by French social security, to help you work through issues related to your professional activity. You can also use your own network. MdM will cover the cost of four sessions with a psychotherapist of your own choosing;

MdM's "mutuelle" also reimburses up to 225 euros a year for "alternative" medical care, including consultations with a psychologist, for people on French employment contracts (excluding fixed-term CDDU contracts, VSIs, interns and voluntary workers).

**NB:** If you miss an appointment with a psychologist, MdM will still be required to pay for it. Please remember to give the psychologist advance notice (usually 24 hours), if you are unable to attend a session.

This support procedure is managed by HR Directorate's Career Development Department. If you have any questions, doubt or queries, please contact Alice Hennessy, Career Development department Manager, who will help you find a formula suited to your needs.







Human Resources Department  
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