

# WORKBOOK ON SECURITY:

## PRACTICAL STEPS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT RISK



## CHAPTER 4: WELLBEING AND STRESS

In this Chapter we look at what stress is. We then consider the relationship between stress and security for HRDs. We list some ideas HRDs have shared for dealing with stress, and we conclude with space for you to develop your own plan for dealing with stress.

### What is stress?

Stress is a totally natural reaction – it is the way our bodies respond to challenges in our environment. Physically, some of the following things happen: our heart beats faster, our blood pressure rises, our mouths go dry and we start to sweat – we are now prepared physically to freeze, fight or flee. Normally this doesn't last very long and generally our bodies quickly return to normal.

Having a certain amount of stress is positive. It can improve our motivation and effectiveness. However, stress can lead to problems when it is intense, and long-term. For HRDs, who may experience prolonged periods of stress, dealing with stress can be a particular challenge.

There is no one solution for stress, because:

- Stress is person specific – what stresses one person may not stress another person in a similar situation.
- Stress is time specific – what may stress one person at one point in time may not stress them at another time, sometimes because their experience mitigates it or the stress has become cumulative.
- Stress is context specific – having similar experiences in different contexts, such as one where you have supportive relationships, can fundamentally change the experience of stress.

Some of the symptoms of stress can be:

Fig: 4.1

On your body	On your mood	On your behaviour
Headaches	Anxiety	Angry outbursts
Muscle tension	Anger	Irritation
Change in sleep patterns	Depression	Eating more or less
Exhaustion	Paranoia	Drinking more alcohol
Change in sex drive	Jealousy	Smoking more
Digestion problems	Restlessness	Social withdrawal
Feeling dizzy	Mood swings	

### Stress, HRDs and security

The life of a Human Rights Defender (HRD) at risk can be inherently stressful.

This stress may be the result of human rights violations you experience personally, threats received, the risks you face because of your work, witnessing atrocities, assisting people who are traumatised, dealing with the seemingly never-ending demands of work, and the difficulties of balancing work and relationship/family responsibilities.

HRDs have identified the management of stress as one of the factors impacting their security. Those who have been through periods of deep stress have explained different security-related aspects, such as:

- becoming careless of danger
- finding it difficult to take decisions

- physical exhaustion
- alienating sources of support through angry or moody behaviour
- drinking more alcohol
- feeling 'burnt out'

## Tools for Wellbeing

Stress will affect you less if you take good care of yourself daily in these 4 basic areas:

**Diet** – sit down and eat balanced meals with lots of fruit and vegetables. Avoid fast food. Limit stimulants such as coffee, alcohol and sugary foods and drinks, which can cause emotional highs and lows as well as other health problems.

**Exercise** – stress produces chemicals in the body to prepare us for fight or flight. Fight or flight may have been the best strategies when humankind hunted wild animals to survive, but for most of us, times have changed! Exercise is a healthy way to reduce these stress chemicals. Aim for 30 minutes of activity, such as walking, each day. Three to 4 times a week, aim to do exercise which raises your heartbeat, such as playing football, dancing, running etc, for 20-30 minutes. Build this up slowly if you haven't been very active recently and check with a health professional first. Exercise usually has instantaneous effects on your sense of wellbeing, as well as wide-ranging health benefits.

**Relaxation** – spend some time every day relaxing your body and mind. This could be yoga, praying or meditating or just taking a few deep breaths. Build relaxing activities into your week.

**Sleep** – (each person is different but all need between 6 and 8 hours) – but if you look after yourself in terms of diet, exercise and relaxation, then generally sleep should not be a problem.



*Relaxing after a workshop*

Organisations where HRDs work should consider how they can improve the stress levels of their staff, for example by:

- making it clear that talking openly about risk is encouraged
- encouraging people to take breaks/holidays and discouraging a culture of regular excessive working hours being a badge of dedication (exhausted people working long hours generally results in a decline in work quality)
- organising practical and/or symbolic activities which encourage and strengthen the team spirit

## HRD sharing their ideas for dealing with stress

Everyone naturally enjoys activities which relax and absorb them. These stress-reducing activities were shared by HRDs from Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe and the Middle East:

- Writing (I sometimes do automatic writing – that is, writing without thinking what is coming out of the pen)
- Going to my religious centre to pray
- Going for long walks
- Meditating
- Playing football
- Talking to a therapist or my sister

*“Sometimes the incidences of human rights violations seem relentless. In our organisation it is important to celebrate our small achievements - such as a successful resolution of one client's case. This helps us remain positive. We know that we cannot individually move a mountain, but if each person takes one stone, eventually we can dismantle it.”*

HRD, Middle East

*“Front Line is developing a stress management programme and each week we have a session where we test and practice the techniques we have learned. There's something that suits everyone. We also have regular social events - football matches, film shows, parties and other celebrations.”*

Mary Lawlor, Director, Front Line

- Writing articles on issues that I feel helpless about
- Playing with my children
- Dancing in my community
- Spending romantic time with my partner
- Going for a run
- Having a massage
- Sitting down quietly with a cup of tea
- Writing to my networks for support
- Letting myself sleep for as long as I want
- Going to the gym
- Listening to music
- Turning off the phone for few hours
- Giving myself a treat
- Having a long bath



**Activity for your Plan:**

Now produce an action plan to deal with your stress.

Consider what you already do to reduce your stress:

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Can you do that activity more frequently?

What other techniques have you always wanted to make time for or try? Look at the list created by other HRDs in the previous section – would any of those techniques work for you? Write a list of commitments you make to yourself to reduce stress and a concrete plan for how you will incorporate more stress-relieving activities into your life.



*Bernadette Ntumba, Eastern DRC - a symbolic action with stones and flowers commemorating the lives of WHRDs*



## My plan for improving wellbeing

Fig. 4.2

	Improvement	Timing
Diet		
Exercise		
Relaxation		
Other		







Here is an example from a HRD:

Fig 4.3

	Improvement	Timing
Diet	Have a sit-down breakfast	Every morning
Exercise	Go for a walk Play football with friends	Mon, Wed, Fri Sat
Relaxation	Play with my children (more) Take holidays	At least an hour a day 3 times a year
Other	Stop taking work home  Discuss the reasons for my stress with my wife and brother  Go to bed before midnight, Mon – Fri	

There are many tools available to help lessen stress. The most important tool at your disposal is your own mind. When you recognise for yourself that you experience negative stress, then is the time to decide to do something about it.

Reducing your stress is a process which requires some time investment from you, but will reward you richly by making you happier, more resilient and more effective in your relationships and work. A less stressed HRD is undoubtedly a more effective HRD.

The contents of this section of the Front Line Workbook are not meant to replace therapy or other professional help where that is necessary and available.



*Standing in solidarity. Members of The Borok People’s Human Rights Organisation, Tripura, India*