

HOW TO MAINTAIN YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19 OUTBREAK

Advice for all staff in MSF missions



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1. Introduction

News of the spread of the Corona virus has rapidly permeated our lives lately. The impact of this pandemic continues disrupting “normal” operations globally. We are being challenged to adapt to a different daily personal & professional life, and to find ways to deal with uncertainty the best way we can.

Feelings of stress & concern are very natural human reactions to this unusual situation. Considering this global distress, we need to take good care of our mental health. It’s our intention, through this document, to support you during this adaptation process and to help you finding ways to cope with distress & uncertainty.

First you will find several sets of recommendations to foster individual & team resilience, targeted to different MSF staff groups:

- General advice for all field staff, you can find in chapter 2.
- If you are a responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, please go to chapter 3.
- If you are a team manager or supervisor, please go to chapter 4.
- If you are away from home, please go to chapter 5.
- If you are in confinement or quarantine, please go to chapter 6.

Then you will discover a toolbox with self-care & team care exercises.

In the bibliography at the end, you will find all the international & scientific sources that inspired and nourished this document.

Let’s take care of each other during these challenging times!

Caroline, Barbara & Ihsan

2. Set of recommendations for all MSF field staff: How to sustain your mental health during the COVID-19 outbreak

Introduction: How to understand the psychological reactions during this outbreak

Being confronted with this outbreak is perceived as a direct & indirect **threat to our safety**. The limbic system in our brain is hardwired to notice threats and activate the **Fight – Flight – Freeze** response. This response prepares our body physically to deal with actual & perceived danger. This is a very useful survival mechanism, **but when prolonged activation:**

- we become anxious & nervous
- we might have trouble sleeping
- we have decreased access to the rational analytical part of our brain (prefrontal cortex), needed to take a step back, reflect and make logical decisions.
- We are more focused on our own needs and we become less capable to be sensitive to the needs of others. This might be perceived as egocentricity and a lack of empathy.

These reactions are **automatic & mostly unconscious**. Feeling stressed & concerned is actually very normal in this situation. Managing your stress & wellbeing during this time is as important as managing your physical health.

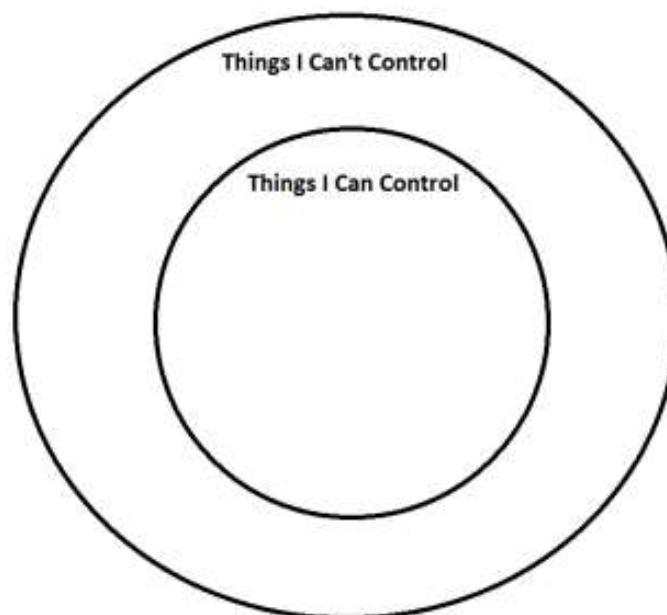
The following recommendations are specific actions you can take to **regulate & manage your stress response**.

How to be well informed without feeling overwhelmed

- Be well informed about the virus and preventive measures
- Only use **trustworthy sources** of information (MSF guidelines & WHO recommendations)
- **Reduce** the number of times per day you check the news.
- **Limit your exposure to media** that make you feel anxious. Choose your media according to the level of exposure you want. Privilege reading article (from reliable sources) than watching news on TV to reduce the emotional contamination.
- **Limit your exposure to rumors** that are not coming from reliable sources
- Also pay attention to **positive elements** in the news about the outbreak (how many people healed, decrease of new cases in some countries, ...)

How to restore your sense of control

- **Accept** what you cannot change and focus on **what you can control**:
 - Remind yourself of what you do **not** have under your control
 - The length of this health crisis
 - The actions & reactions of others
 - Whether or not others comply with the protective measures
 - What will happen in the future
 - The financial impact of this crisis
 - The impact on the schools
 - Remind yourself of what is your field of possible **action**
 - Your positive attitude
 - Your life style & hygiene
 - Your social distancing
 - Respecting the preventive measures
 - Sharing the information on prevention to others
 - The amount of information you search
 - How many times you check the news per day
 - How you communicate with others
 - Make realistic to-do lists with (small) tasks that you can “check” after you’ve accomplished them.
 - Try to monotask & avoid multitasking as much as possible.



Self-care & managing the stress response

- Take care of your **basic needs**: Be sure to eat, drink and sleep regularly. Becoming biologically deprived puts you at risk to be more vulnerable to diseases and may also compromise your ability to be fully operational.
- **Take breaks**: give yourself a rest from working & try limiting overwork as much as possible.
- **Disconnect** yourself from COVID-19 information/work by keeping time to nourish your personal life.
- **Recharge** your batteries. Try to do activities that makes you feel good. Use your creativity to find **new activities**, adapted to your current situation; reading, watching movies, doing sports in your living room, knitting, cooking, watching funny video's, ... Find reasons to **laugh & have fun**.
- **Practice gratitude**: every day at the end of the day, think of 3 things that you can be grateful for. (See tool box in the annexes)
- Be mindful **not to use unhealthy strategies** to deal with your stress. Avoid increase in alcohol, smoking, eating unhealthy food, ... Even though this is a new situation, try using healthy ways of dealing with stress that have helped you get through past difficulties.
- **Self check-in**: monitor yourself over time for any stress signs that might indicate you are too tired, too stressed or feeling down. Talk to someone you trust or seek psychosocial support if needed; contact your staff health responsible. (see toolbox for a Self Check-In Tool)
- Remark: if you have **previous physical or mental health conditions**, be aware that it could be aggravated by the stress that you are experiencing in this complicated period. If you have any worries please contact the staff health responsible in the project or your personal GP.

How to stay connected in times of social distancing

- Stay (virtually) connected to your **friends & family**.
- Do not always talk about the pandemic, talk about **other subjects too**.
- **Support each other** as much as possible; check proactively how you can help each other. Share your experiences and your tips.
- **Reach out** to people who you know might be isolated.
- Respect **people's differences** in their need to connect. Some people prefer solitude when dealing with difficult emotions.

How to make sense of the situation

- Try **not to focus on the losses and lack** you are experiencing (lack of freedom, lack of contact,..), rather on the positive things that are also happening (e.g. more solidarity, having someone contacting you...) and your personal accomplishment.
- **Acceptance** is key in being able to make sense of a difficult situation.

- Remind yourself of **why** we have to adhere to preventive measures:
 - To protect ourselves and others
 - To contribute to stop the pandemic
 - To take care of our community & society
- Try **reframing** the situation:
 - What could we learn from this?
 - Could this be an opportunity to grow?
 - Could this be an opportunity to practice personal and communal resilience?

3. Set of recommendations for MSF staff responding to the COVID-19 outbreak

You might be involved in the response to the COVID-19 outbreak in your country of mission or in your home country. Responding to an emergency is always demanding and can be stressful. Specific challenges related to this COVID-19 epidemic need to be considered and managed in advance.

Specific challenges for health workers and responders to the epidemic:

- High level of uncertainty of being infected or not due to the invisibility of the virus.
- Common symptoms, as a simple fever or a cough, can be mistaken for COVID-19 symptoms.
- Risk of being contaminated and fear to contaminate others.
- Strict bio-security measures adding extra pressure: PPE, no touch policy, constant vigilance, strict procedures ...
- Limited protective gears and other medical resources.
- Risk of confrontation to numerous deaths.
- Risk of stigmatization of health staff by their families and community.
- Reduction of social contact that can bring a feeling of isolation.
- Considering the probable increase in medical activities in combination with the limited staff movement and availability (colleagues being sick, colleagues from abroad not being able to reinforce the team, difficulty to be replaced, gaps to cover ...), there might be an increase on the workload, increasing the level of tiredness and the risk of exhaustion.

All these elements may bring along different **emotional reactions**: anxiety, fear, anger, sadness, helplessness, hopelessness...Those emotional reactions are **perfectly understandable**.

What to do individually for your wellbeing

- **Meet Basic Needs.** Be sure to eat, drink and sleep regularly. Becoming physiologically deprived puts you at risk and may also compromise your ability to care for patients.
- **Connect with Colleagues.** Talk to your colleagues and support one another. Infectious outbreaks can isolate people because of their fear and anxiety. Tell your story and listen to others'. Find a "buddy" and look after each other.

- **Communicate Constructively.**
 - Share your frustrations and reflect together on solutions. Searching for solutions together is more helpful than focusing on problems only.
 - Communicate clearly with colleagues. Focus on the facts, express your opinion in simple ways and check if the other person understood correctly. Communicate in a constructive manner.
 - Complement each other: compliments can be powerful motivators and stress moderators.

- **Stay updated on what's going on in the project.** Participate in meetings to stay informed about the situation, protection measures, plans & events.

- **Limit Media Exposure.** Graphic imagery and worrisome messages will increase your stress and may reduce your effectiveness at work and overall wellbeing. Don't stay connected all day to media alerts and define only one moment a day to check the news.

- **Respect Differences.** Some people need to talk while others need to be alone. Recognize and respect these differences in yourself, your patients and your colleagues.

- You might be **stigmatized** by friends, family and community for being at high risk of being contaminated.
 - Inform them of the protective measures you are taking to do your work. It may reassure them.
 - Connect and share with your colleagues: they might experience similar situations and you can share tips to feel better.
 - If stigmatization creates any difficulties that impacts your work, share with your manager and/or the fieldco/staff health responsible.

- **Contact with Family.** Contact your loved ones, if possible. They are an anchor of support outside the healthcare system. Sharing and staying connected may also help them support you better.

- **Self Check-In.**
 - Monitor your level of energy and fatigue overtime. If you feel too tired, and before feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by work, talk to you manager to review your objectives and priorities. Make the difference between what is urgent and what is important; see what can be delegated, what can be adapted; ask for a time to rest... this will allow you to recharge your battery and be in better shape to continue working.
 - Monitor yourself over time for any symptoms of depression or stress disorder: prolonged sadness, difficulty sleeping, intrusive memories, hopelessness. Talk

to a peer, supervisor, the person in charge of staff health or seek professional help if needed. (see toolbox for a Self Check-In Tool)

- If you have some **previous physical or mental health conditions**: Talk to the staff health responsible and be extra careful not to exhaust your resources and trespass your limits. Adapt your work accordingly.

- **Honor your work**. Remind yourself that despite obstacles or frustrations, you are fulfilling a noble calling—taking care of those most in need. Be gentle towards yourself and acknowledge what you are doing. Recognize your colleagues (either formally or informally) for their work. At the end of each day, acknowledge what you, your team and the project have accomplished.

- **Disconnect from work**. Give yourself a rest from tending to patients. Whenever possible, allow yourself to do something unrelated to work that you find comforting or relaxing. Taking a walk if possible, doing exercise, listening to music, reading a book, or talking with a friend can help. Some people may feel guilty if they are not working full-time or are taking time to take care of themselves when so many others are suffering. Recognize that taking appropriate rest leads to proper care of patients after your break.

For more information on self-care, please go to Chapter 2 “How to sustain your mental health during the COVID-19 outbreak” and also, please take a look at the tool box in the annex.

4. Set of recommendations for team managers and supervisors: What you can do to protect & maintain the well-being of your team.

Introduction

Team managers and supervisors will face similar stressors as their staff, and potentially additional pressure considering the level of responsibility in their role. Often managers experience team wellbeing as an additional task they have to do, when already feeling overloaded with work. We are aware that for many managers, this protective part of their role is **challenging to implement**. By this set of recommendations we hope to support managers to face this challenge.

It's important to realize that as a manager **you are legitimate** to invest time & energy in team wellbeing. By doing so, you keep all staff protected from chronic stress and poor mental health during this COVID-19 response. This will increase the capacity of the staff to fulfil their roles efficiently – whether health workers or in allied supporting roles.

Human bonds, togetherness, healthy relationships, feeling we are not alone, are some of the most beneficial factors to mental health and crucial contributors to work quality.

Make sure you take very good care of yourself too. Please remember you can only take care of your team, if you **take care of yourself**. This way, you will be able to role model self-care strategies and thus help mitigate accumulation of team stress & fatigue.

What you can do as a team leader

➤ Regularly and supportively **monitor your staff for their wellbeing** and foster an environment which promotes staff speaking safely with you if their stress level is rising.

Example: Regularly ask each team member how they are doing, how they are feeling at work. Observe changes in behavior and mood of the staff and if you do, address this proactively with the person to find a solution together.

➤ Provide regular and **clear information on protective measures** to be followed by your team members according to their position and the evaluation of risks. This will participate to decrease the stress of being contaminated.

➤ Ensure good quality communication and **accurate information updates** are provided to all staff. This can help to mitigate any worries & uncertainties that they have and helps them to regain a sense of control.

Example: Morning flash info with the team to start the working day. Remember to also celebrate the achievements & success.

➤ to avoid team exhaustion, assess regularly **the workload** of your team members and review with them their objectives, the priorities, things that can be let go of. As this outbreak may last long, with a risk of human resources shortage (staff on sick leave or incapacity to bring in new international staff), remember this will be a marathon, not a sprint.

➤ Make sure your staff gets the **rest and recuperation** they need. Rest is important for physical and mental wellbeing. This time off will allow them to implement their necessary self-care activities to be fit to continue to work on the long run and avoid falling sick.

➤ Foster collaboration and **peer to peer support** amongst your team members. Invite them to identify someone in the team to take care of & to check up on each other.

➤ Provide a brief and **regular space to allow team members to express** their concerns and ask their questions. Encourage exchange of coping skills amongst colleagues.

Example: at the end of the day, organize a team debriefing where everyone can share how the day went by and how they are feeling. Encourage exchange of solutions between colleagues. End the meeting by asking your team members to mention 3 things that went well today. (see the tool box: “weather forecast in teams” & “highs & lows in teams”).

➤ Without breaking confidentiality, **pay particular attention** to any staff that you may be aware of are experiencing difficulties in their personal life, previously experiencing poor mental health or who lack social support (possibly due to community ostracization). Ask them how they are doing and what they need to feel better.

➤ Facilitate access to, and ensure staff are aware of where they can **access mental health and psychosocial support** services. Give information on local MH resources if available and if not, contact the psychosocial support service in Brussels HQ, to see what could be done.

5. Set of recommendations for MSF staff away from home during pandemic times

Introduction

Some of you may, for the moment, no longer have the opportunity to return home because the borders of your home country and/or your mission country have been closed. Others may have (voluntarily or somewhat unwillingly) decided to extend their mission, knowing that no one could be sent to replace them.

Whatever the reason, being away from home and your loved ones during a pandemic is a big source of stress for many.

Specific challenges for MSF staff far from home

- Uncertainty as to when it will be possible to return home and impossibility of giving return dates.
- Not being able to be physically there to support your loved ones.
- Not being there to help the people of your own country or region.
- Your loved ones at home may no longer be as "emotionally" available as they were to support / listen to you, because they have to deal with their own difficulties and stresses.
- Your family and friends far away experiencing increased worrying about you.
- The risk that a loved one back home gets contaminated and may end up in a critical / die without you being able to return.
- In the event of your own contamination during your mission, not knowing if you will be able to be medically evacuated or if you will have to be treated in the mission country instead of your home country.

All these elements may bring along different **emotional reactions**: anxiety, fear, anger, sadness, helplessness, hopelessness... These emotional reactions are **perfectly understandable**.

What can help

- **Inform.** Even from a distance, you can educate your loved ones on how they can protect themselves. Take the time to explain the importance of respecting preventive and hygienic measures. For more information on the COVID epidemic, best practices, how to protect

yourself and others, refer to the WHO website.
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

- Also inform your loved ones about the precautionary and protective measures taken by MSF in your mission so that they are less worried about you.
- **Help your loved ones to reflect.** If it's important to you, help your loved ones think about what they can do to take care of themselves, taking into account the consequences that confinement can have on them: help them list the things to consider, share the importance of self-care (see Chapter 2)
- **Stay in touch** with your loved ones. Reduce connection through often anxiety-provoking social media and favor qualitative connections. If necessary, increase the frequency of contacts. If possible, use the means of communication that promote eye contact. Hearing is good, seeing is often even more reassuring for everyone (what's app, skype...).
- **Talk about other things** than COVID-19. Besides news related to the pandemic, also try to discuss other subjects with your loved ones: remember good memories together, discuss the last film you watched or book you read, discuss your future projects, share the moments of the day for which each of you can be grateful (see tool box for an example of gratitude exercise).
- **Identify a resource person** in your country of origin. If you have a loved one who is isolated and for whom you are particularly concerned, you can also identify in your network one or more resource people living nearby who could reach out to help them if necessary.
- **Choose your sources of information** carefully. When looking for information on developments of the epidemic in your country of origin, be sure to use reliable links (your country's ministry of health, WHO). Also set times of the day when you search the information (to avoid being constantly anxious). Prefer reading articles rather than viewing a television report, in order to reduce emotional contagion. Focus on the facts rather than the rumors spread on social media.
- **Don't make false promises.** As the situation changes very quickly, do not make any promises to your loved ones regarding the dates of your return.
- **Build strong relationships with your colleagues in the field.** The lack of emotional availability of your usual network in your home country can give you an even bigger feeling of isolation and loneliness. It is therefore even more essential to create and maintain connection with your colleagues in the field:
 - Share your experiences and resources with colleagues.
 - Pay attention to one another.

- Support each other even more than usual. If necessary, choose a person from the team, a “buddy”, with whom you feel particularly at ease and determine moments during the week to take stock on your situation, how you feel and your personal reality in your home country.
 - The psychosocial service of your OC or partner section is also always available to support you in difficult times. You will find the contact details at the end of this brochure.
 - Set up moments of disconnection by doing activities alone or with your team (movies, board games, music, physical exercises...).
- **Diary.** If you feel it is difficult to share your experience with your loved ones from a distance but you think it may be important for you to do so after you return home, write down your experiences, thoughts, emotions in a notebook to share with them when you return.

When going back home

Depending on the situation at the time of your return, keep in mind that you will have to comply with the laws in force in your country. It is therefore possible that a quarantine may be imposed on your arrival before you can reunite with your loved ones.

The Staff Health Unit of your OC will also give you certain recommendations to follow when you return from your mission. Remember to read them and ask the necessary questions to your Medco or the Staff Health Unit of your OC if certain things are not clear.

Finally, even if no particular measure is imposed on you by your country or recommended by MSF, your family, it's possible that relatives or community express fears and reluctance to be in contact with you the first weeks of your return.

You may be stigmatized by some or rejected by others for a while, especially if you have worked abroad in health facilities in a country where the Coronavirus is widespread. While this type of behavior and reaction can be difficult to live with, it is important to know that it is very often associated with the fear of being infected. Talking about your return with your loved ones, mutual fears and concerns BEFORE returning to your country of origin will allow to decrease the fears and to find the solutions best suited to your reality.

The psychosocial care unit of your OC or partner section will offer you an emotional debriefing when you go back home. It will be an opportunity amongst others to discuss concerns you may have going back home.

6. Set of recommendations for MSF staff in confinement or quarantine.

Whether self-chosen or imposed, a period of isolation can be psychologically and emotionally demanding.

There are several ways to foster resilience during this period, steps that may help mitigate some of the negative effects of quarantine on your mental wellbeing.

Things you can do to cope

➤ Establish routines

The disruption in your normal daily routines can be one of the most difficult aspects of quarantine. This can leave you feeling directionless as you try to figure out how to fill all the hours of the day.

Set up a weekly **schedule & planning** with professional, recreational & social activities. It can be helpful to structure your professional time much like a regular workday. Keep your essential daily routines: wake-up time, meal times, sleeping schedule, hygiene.... This helps feeling grounded.

This can be a challenge, however, if you're at home with other family members, including children, who are now home all day as well. Left without the structure of a normal school day, kids can be left feeling just as out-of-sorts as adults.

If you're trying to keep small kids entertained while stuck in the house, or even trying to keep working amidst it all, it's important to find a routine that works for you. Plan out activities that will keep everyone busy so you can get some work done. Try creating a daily schedule, but don't get too wrapped up in sticking to a strict routine. Make your own routines and break up the day in order to stay off monotony.

➤ Be as active as possible

Even relatively short periods of physical inactivity can have an impact on your health, both mentally and physically.

Fortunately, there are plenty of at-home workout ideas that can help keep you moving even when you are stuck inside the house. Your quarantine may be brief, but staying active may help you feel better and maintain your level of fitness. It's also a great way to help combat the sense of malaise and boredom that can come from being stuck inside day after day.

At-Home Workout Ideas: You don't need a bunch of expensive workout equipment to get a good workout. Here are just a few things you can do to stay in shape at home: exercise videos, bodyweight exercises, online workouts, fitness apps, jump rope, yoga ...

Relaxation exercises may be useful also (e.g. breathing, meditation.... . Look at the “tool box” in the annex for some examples.)

➤ **Combat frustration and boredom**

Some of the distress of being quarantined stems from boredom and frustration. Finding ways to stay occupied is important, so try to maintain as many of your activities as you can. Keep working on projects or find new activities to fill your time, whether it's organizing your closet or trying out a new creative hobby. Carry out activities you enjoy that do not require moving out of your location: reading, drawing, learning a language, playing, listening to music, cooking, etc.;

Getting things done in the house can also provide a sense of purpose and competency. It gives you something to work towards and something to look forward to each day. So make a plan, list some things you'd like to accomplish, and then start checking a few things off your list each day.

➤ **Communicate**

Staying in contact with other people not only decreases boredom, but it is also critical for minimizing the sense of isolation. Stay in touch with friends and family by phone and messages. Reach out to others on social media. Talk to others who are going through the same thing as it can provide a sense of community and empowerment.

Ideas for staying connected

- Eat regular meals with others in the home, keeping safe distance (or through video conference 😊)
- Check-in with friends and family each day by phone
- Use different forms of communication including phone, text, email, messaging, and videocall
- Try supporting others; reassure a friend who is feeling stressed out or worried
- Use social networks to stay connected to others and to share practices that help you cope, to express support, to feel connected with others.
- Speak about how you feel to someone you trust and consider speaking to the staff health responsible if you see that your mood is worsening. You can also contact

mental health and counselling services in your mission (if existing) or the psychosocial service at Brussels HQ for information and advice.

➤ **Stay informed, but not overwhelmed**

People tend to experience greater anxiety when they feel like they don't have access to the information that they need. On the other hand, however, is the sense of panic that can stem from being immersed 24/7 in reports that focus on inaccurate or overly negative information. Rather than spending your time watching TV or looking for news on the internet and social media, focus on getting helpful information from trusted sources. Sources such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), World Health Organization (WHO), state and local health departments can all be helpful.

Limit however the number of times checking for information to one or two times a day rather than every hour.

➤ **Remember why you're doing this**

When you are feeling frustrated or 'trapped', it can be helpful to think about the reasons why you are quarantining yourself. If you have been potentially exposed to the Coronavirus, avoiding others is an altruistic action. You minimize the chance that you might unknowingly spread the illness to other people, even if you are currently asymptomatic.

Flattening the Curve. Slowing the spread of the illness helps keep the number of sick people at a level that hospitals are able to treat. If infection rates spike abruptly as the disease spreads, hospitals and health care workers can be overwhelmed and unable to adequately treat everyone.

By doing your part to prevent the spread of the disease, you are protecting others and making sure that those who are sick are able to have greater access to available health care. Reminding yourself of these reasons can sometimes make your days in quarantine a little easier to bear.

Avoid self-stigmatizing. Do not internalize the public stigma nor accept the stereotyped opinions that have been witnessed since the beginning of the outbreak.

7. The psychosocial support available

- ❖ If you are a coordinator: The psychosocial service in MSF Brussels HQ is available to provide you with advice to organize staff support in your mission/project. Send us a mail and we'll call you back. For emergencies, you can call following number:
+ 32 476 907 083
- ❖ If you are an international staff: You can contact the psychosocial service in Brussels directly for phone support in case of need. Send us a mail and we'll call you back.
- ❖ If you are a national staff: In case of need, please talk to your PMR/Medco/Staff health responsible to request local mental health support. If not locally available, ask your PMR/Medco/Staff health responsible to contact us.

Our mail address: Psychosocial-service-OCB@brussels.msf.org

8. Tool box

Grounding exercises

Grounding exercises help to switch off the Fight-Flight-Freeze response and activate our body's relaxation response called the Rest and Digest response. They reduce anxiety & calm the body.

❖ **Abdominal breathing exercises:**

- **Take a couple of deep breaths** while sitting on a chair with your hands behind your head. This helps your diaphragm and ribs expand.
- **Box breathing:** breathe in 4 counts – hold breath 4 counts – breathe out 4 counts – hold breath 4 counts. Repeat the cycle a couple of times.
- **4-7-8 breathing:** breathe in 4 counts – hold breath 7 counts – breathe out 8 counts. Repeat cycle a couple of times.
- **Breath counting:** without changing your breath, count “one” to yourself as you exhale. The next time you exhale, count “two,” and so on up to “ten.”

❖ **Yawning:** intentional yawning stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system and triggers the relaxation response (Rest & Digest response).

❖ **Meditation** (see below for access to Headspace app)

❖ Exercises like **yoga, tai chi, stretching.**

❖ **Relaxation techniques:** body scan, guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation (see below for further information. There are many guided videos available on the internet)

Guided Imagery

This technique involves the systematic practice of creating a detailed mental image of an attractive and peaceful setting or environment. The practice of guided imagery is extremely portable, as it relies on nothing more than one's imagination and concentration abilities which people always have at their disposal (provided they aren't exhausted). However, like most techniques requiring mental concentration, it is usually most successfully practiced without interruption in a setting that is free from distracting stimulation.

There is no single correct way to use visual imagery for stress relief. However, something similar to the following steps is often recommended:

- Find a private calm space and make yourself comfortable.
- Take a few slow and deep breaths to center your attention and calm yourself.
- Close your eyes.
- Imagine yourself in a beautiful location, where everything is as you would ideally have it. Some people visualize a beach, a mountain, a forest, or a being in a favorite room sitting on a favorite chair.
- Imagine yourself becoming calm and relaxed. Alternatively, imagine yourself smiling, feeling happy and having a good time.
- Focus on the different sensory attributes present in your scene so as to make it more vivid in your mind. For instance, if you are imagining the beach, spend some time vividly imagining the warmth of the sun on your skin, the smell of the ocean, seaweed and salt spray, and the sound of the waves, wind and seagulls. The more you can invoke your senses, the more vivid the entire image will become.
- Remain within your scene, touring its various sensory aspects for five to ten minutes or until you feel relaxed.
- While relaxed, assure yourself that you can return to this place whenever you want or need to relax.
- Open your eyes again and then rejoin your world.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation, or PMR, is a stress relief technique that relies upon subtle rather than gross (large) muscular movements to promote relaxation and tension relief.

Progressive muscle relaxation is based on the observation that it is easier for muscles to relax from a position of high tension than it is from a position of lower tension. The kind of muscular tension that causes headaches and bodily pains tends to be a sort of moderate residual tension that people walk around with (and may not notice) for days. It is not the same sort of high tension that people create when they are trying to lift or push against heavy objects.

The premise of PMR is that by tightening and releasing all the major muscle groups of the body in an exaggerated fashion, you will end up feeling more relaxed and at peace with yourself, and much less stressed than you otherwise would. Consciously exaggerating and releasing muscle tension also helps you learn to recognize when you are holding onto unnecessary muscular tension so that you can use relaxation techniques to relieve this stress before it gets out of hand.

Before you begin PMR, take several deep, diaphragmatic breaths. Then proceed with the following steps:

- Choose a quiet, dimly lit room that is a comfortable temperature. Lie down or sit comfortably and close your eyes.
- Breathe in deeply through your nose, hold the breath for a few seconds, and then completely release it through slightly parted lips. Repeat this several times. Imagine your body becoming warm and heavy. Let go of any tension that you notice.
- As you continue breathing slowly, clench both fists, squeezing them as hard as you can. Tighten both biceps and hold this tension for several seconds.
- Release the tension and feel it ebb away. Focus on the change in sensations. Be sure to release all the tension in your fingers, your hands and your arms.
- Now extend your fingers slightly as you let your arms drop to your lap or fall to your side. Try to keep your hands open as you feel the last remnants of tension float away. Continue to breathe in and out very slowly. Feel the warmth and heaviness that comes with relaxation.

Progressive muscle relaxation continues in this manner until all the major body muscle groups have been sequentially tensed for several seconds and then relaxed. A list of each muscle group, including instructions for how to tense these muscles is given just below:

- **Hands and Arms:** Clench your hands into fists, and contract the muscles in your forearms and biceps. You may need to hold your arms out in front of you or at your side to allow the tensing and releasing to occur.
- **Facial muscles:** Raise your eyebrows as high as possible and furrow/wrinkle your forehead. Then, move on to squinting or squeezing your eyes shut as tight as you can. Next, clench your teeth together tightly. Finally, squeeze your whole face up into a knot (squeeze your eyes, mouth and nose together).
- **Neck:** Bring your chin slowly down toward your chest. Then, with the shoulders straight and relaxed, turn your head slowly to the right. Finally, turn your head slowly to the left.
- **Chest:** Take as deep a breath as possible ("puffing" your chest out) and hold it for a count of five seconds.
- **Shoulders:** Start by holding a shoulder shrug (pushing your shoulders up toward your ears) for five seconds. Then, slowly pull your shoulders back. End by pushing the shoulders forward.
- **Upper Back:** With your shoulders resting on the back of the chair, carefully push your body forward so that your back is arched. If this particular technique causes pain or discomfort, you can skip it and continue on to the next muscle group.
- **Abdomen:** Start by "sucking in your gut" (pulling in the stomach as far as possible). Then, push out your stomach or tense it as if you were preparing to be punched.
- **Legs:** Start by raising your right leg, tensing your thigh and calf muscles, and pulling your toes back toward you. Then, raise your left leg in a similar fashion. Finally, raise both legs together and tighten your calf and thigh muscles as you extend your toes and point them forward as far as you can.
- **Feet:** Without raising the legs, point the toes. Next, without raising the legs, pull your toes toward you as far as possible. End with digging your toes into the floor.

Throughout the exercise, keep your breathing very deep and very regular. Notice the warm spreading feeling that envelops your body as you tense and release each muscle group. This feeling is the spread of muscular relaxation throughout your body.

Once you've tensed a set of muscles, try to leave them be and don't make any demands of them for the duration of the exercise. Don't use your hands after you've tensed them, for instance. Try to maintain the state of relaxation in already tensed and released areas as you move to new areas, allowing your entire body to feel more and more relaxed as you progress. Once you have wrinkled and relaxed your forehead, try to keep it smooth; once you have clenched and relaxed your jaw, part your lips slightly to avoid clenching it again, and so on. Pause for about 30 seconds between tensing each set of muscles. Focus on your breathing and the sensation of relaxation which will be spreading throughout your body.

Body scan

The body can be a sponge to the emotions and stress we experience throughout the day. You might notice that at the end of a long day, your body feels tense and you feel agitated or irritable. There are all sorts of meditations and relaxation techniques you can do to unwind, but scanning the body with your attention can put you in touch with the specific places where you hold tension. It can immediately relax you when you're in a stressful moment.

Of course, during a body scan you're also giving your body an opportunity to release that tension. In fact, when you scan your body you can instruct a specific area of the body to relax or calm down (quietly in your mind or aloud). Sometimes, with enough attention and focus on that area of the body, your muscles loosen and relax.

Here are step by step instructions for scanning your body for **stress relief**:

1. Get into a comfortable position. You might practice by lying on the floor, or a mat, or your bed. Or if it's more comfortable, you can sit in a chair. Whatever is comfortable for you. However, try not to fall asleep if you're lying down.
2. Place your attention at the top of your head or on one of your toes. And very slowly move your attention to each area of the body, working your way down or up, depending upon where you started. You can repeat this process by working your way back to where you started. Remember to go nice and slow so that each part of your body is touched by your awareness.
3. As you practice a body scan, keep your attention open and aware. You may experience a certain feeling when your attention is on your belly, for instance. Or you might have a random memory appear in your consciousness. As you practice a body scan, simply notice what is going on inside you as your attention moves across your body.

You might notice that as you slowly put your attention on a particular part of your body, muscles relax and your body softens. For this reason, a quick body scan is a great stress relief even if you only have a couple of minutes. You can quickly scan your entire body in one

minute. Or, depending upon where you are and your timing, you can make it a longer 20 or 30 minutes meditation.

Doing a body scan can also help you become more aware of yourself and your body. For example, although you might know that you hold tension in your neck and shoulders, perhaps you didn't know that you tend to hold your stomach muscles tight as well. The more you practice the body scan technique the more you will become aware of what's going on inside of you. And the more awareness you develop, the more you will refrain from acting on cravings or desires to use. In fact, with more self-awareness, the healthier your choices will become in general.

If you're looking for a technique that can quickly relieve you of stress, the body scan can do that for you. At the same time, it can be a lasting practice that can promote self-awareness, and in turn, strengthen your sobriety.

Practicing gratitude

Gratitude is the sentiment that a person feels when he/she is grateful for a pleasure that he/she is experiencing or a service or attention that is being given him or her.

Gratitude has been the target of studies that have revealed its impact among which are¹: improved quality of sleep, increased self-esteem, increased empathy and reduced aggression, increased resilience, etc. All of these elements lead us to see our surroundings and relations with others in a more positive way.

The practice of gratitude involves identifying those events that bring us pleasure and do us good.

At the end of a day, think about your day and mentally list or write down 3 things for which you are grateful and want to say thanks. You can also choose something of which you are proud, that has made you happy and brought you pleasure (example: you have finished a document you have been working on for several days, your colleague has thanked you for your support on a project, you have shared a good meal together as a team, etc.).

You can start by trying to do this every day before leaving the office or clinic, on your trip back to the compound, in the shower, before going to sleep, etc. Try to associate this practice with a specific moment of the day so that it becomes a habit.

If the task seems too heavy, spread it out a little to 2 to 3 times a week.

¹ Morin Amy, 7 Scientifically Proven Benefits Of Gratitude That Will Motivate You To Give Thanks Year-Round (source: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/amymorin/2014/11/23/7-scientifically-proven-benefits-of-gratitude-that-will-motivate-you-to-give-thanks-year-round/#7518f26f183c>)

If this exercise works for you, you can add the following questions to help you at the beginning of the day: Why am I grateful this morning? What will make me have some good moments today?

It might be a sunny day. You can begin your day having breakfast in a place you love a lot, meeting up with a nice colleague, etc.

Try this exercise for several days and observe what effect it has on your satisfaction and general mood.

Expressive writing (Diary)²

Expressive writing literally comes from our core, our heart. It is personal and emotional writing without regard to form or other writing conventions such as spelling, punctuation or verb agreement. It simply expresses what is on our mind and in our heart.

Expressive writing pays more attention to feelings than the events, memories, objects, or people in the contents of a narrative. Like narrative writing, expressive writing may have the structure of a story: beginning, middle, and end. Expressive writing is not so much about what happened as it is how you feel about what happened or is happening. Often, expressive writing is turbulent and unpredictable, and that is OK.³

How to practice expressive writing?

- **Time:** Take the time to write as often as you can, especially when you are facing some difficulties within yourself or in your relationships.
- **Topic:** What you choose to write about should be personal and important to you.
- **Write continuously:** Do not worry about punctuation, spelling, grammar. If you run out of things to say, draw a line or repeat what you have already written. Keep pen on paper.
- **Write only for yourself:** You may plan to destroy or hide what you are writing. Do not turn this exercise into a letter. This exercise is for your eyes only.
- **Observe the Opt-out Rule:** If you get into the writing, and you feel that you cannot write about a certain event because it will push you over the edge, STOP writing!
- **Welcome the emotions:** Some people may briefly feel a bit sad or down after expressive writing, especially on the first day or so. Welcome the emotions. If it happens to you, after writing, you could do something that brings you some comfort and be kind to yourself.

² Based on <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/write-yourself-well/201208/expressive-writing>

³ The connection between expressive writing and wellness was discovered by Dr. James Pennebaker, Chair of Psychology, at the University of Texas, Austin. Pennebaker J.W., *Opening Up. The healing Power of Confiding in Others*, New York, W.M. Morrow & Co, 1990

SELF CHECK-IN Tool

The following questions can inspire you to self-reflect during your Self Check-In:

- ❖ Am I noticing any signs of stress or fatigue in myself (physical, emotions, thoughts, behavior)? For example:
 - Physical: rapid heart rate, nausea, dizziness, headaches, sleeping problems, tense muscles, ...
 - Emotions: feeling overemotional, increased sadness, feeling overwhelmed, feeling anxiety, hopelessness, ...
 - Thoughts: worrying a lot, intrusive thoughts, self-judging thoughts, decreased concentration, memory impairment, confusion,..
 - Behavior: change in usual style of communication, increased irritability, less patient, isolation, working more, ...

- ❖ Have I noticed a decrease in pleasurable activities?

- ❖ What is my level of fatigue from a scale of zero (no fatigue at all) to 10 (completely exhausted)?

- ❖ What is my level of energy from a scale of zero (no energy at all) to 10 (full of energy).

- ❖ What has been energy consuming?

- ❖ How long is my usual working day?

- ❖ How is my sleep quality & quantity?

- ❖ How have I been feeling recently? For example: sadness, overwhelm, anger, anxiety, tension, hopeless, joy, gratitude, ..

- ❖ What are my most pressing needs? For example: control, Connection & belonging, physiological needs (rest, food, water,..), meaning & purpose,

- ❖ What could I do to help me meet those needs?

- ❖ What has been giving me positive energy?

Headspace App

If you want to have a free access to this app, follow the instructions below.

The OCA Staff Health Unit (SHU) would like to introduce a tool called **'HEADSPACE'**.

We all know different ways to reduce our stress. Staying physically healthy, taking some time off, doing things we enjoy such as exercise, are just some of the many examples. These are very useful tools to keep our minds fit, to be able to deal with the tough situations and also to prevent you from becoming too stressed.

Another way to train your mind to cope with stress is through 'mindful meditation'. This is meditation combined with a strong focus on the 'here and now'. Meditation is a thousand-year-old practice that is used in many different ways in diverse cultures to live a balanced and less stressful life. Many of you practice meditation already. It helps you to understand yourself and to take care of yourself by being mindful: learning to focus on what your mind and body are doing 'here and now'. Being mindful only takes a little practice and a couple of minutes per day can make a big difference.

It is scientifically proven that mindful meditation can help deal with stress. We know that these techniques can help you to deal with stress, improve your focus and can have a positive effect on your life in general. This is why mindfulness and meditation techniques are already used regularly by the PSCU.

To help you practice mindful meditation MSF has teamed up with an organisation called Headspace to offer free mindful meditation sessions online. Perhaps you have always wanted to try meditation, but didn't know how to start. Now you can!

Headspace is an app that you can download to your personal smartphone or stream on your computer. Subscription is FREE for all MSF employees (office, expatriate & national staff)!

Follow the 3 easy steps.

Step 1: You'll need to fill out this form to notify the MSF administrators that you are interested in redeeming access: <https://forms.gle/JiPp5P37QMcyVGGV9> (you can get the link at work.headspace.com/msf/join). Please use your private email to register with Headspace. It is confidential and GDPR compliant.

Step 2: When you submit the above form the Administrator from the SHU - Psychosocial team is notified. They will now inform Headspace of your eligibility. This process can take up to one month (but usually less). You will receive an email from the Administrator notifying you when you are eligible. As soon as you are eligible your email address will be deleted from the MSF form.

Step 3: Once you receive the email please fill in your email that you registered at the website. work.headspace.com/msf/join

Step 4: Enjoy

Additional information:

- ✓ Can be used on all Android/ Apple phones except, unfortunately, Windows phones (MSF Nokia e.g.)
- ✓ You can access your account and stream Headspace online on your desktop.
- ✓ Your subscription is between you & Headspace. MSF only provides the discount code.
- ✓ Use your personal contact details to subscribe. For any assistance contact the Headspace helpdesk.
- ✓ Headspace collects anonymised product usage data that is stored on USA servers.
- ✓ Check their Terms & Conditions <https://www.headspace.com/terms-andconditions> and Privacy Policy <https://www.headspace.com/privacy-policy> to be fully informed.
- ✓ MSF does not have access to the Headspace data.
- ✓ Only available in English.

The weather forecast in the team

WEATHER REPORT	
Purpose of exercise	Take time to check in with how you are feeling today and share with your team
Setting	Individual/group
Duration	10 min
Material	
Description	<p>The exercise is conducted in 3 times, each part takes about 1 min. It allows us to check in with ourselves, to be more aware of how we feel in order to be more present.</p> <p>Part 1 Ask yourself following question: ‘What is occurring in me at this moment’? Be aware of your body sensations, the thoughts in your mind and the emotions that are present.</p> <p>Part 2 Take note of how you feel, what is on your mind and how your body is.</p> <p>Part 3 Share how you feel with the other members of the team. In this way they are aware of how you are and they will also know that how you are today is not related to you and them.</p> <p><i>(If teams like to use metaphors than you can stay in the theme of weather, for example</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -I have clouds around my head -there is a storm within me -my mind is foggy -clear sky today -I feel blown away -there is thunder in my body -grey skies are clearing up -my body feels chilly -I am in a season of change -the skies are dark
Bibliographie	Adapted from Petit cahier d’exercices de pleine conscience, Ilios Kotsou, 2012

To share highs and lows in a team

HIGHS and LOWS	
Purpose of exercise	Point out highs and lows of the past period
Setting	Group/team
Duration	15 min
Material	Paper and pen
Description	<p>Before starting the meeting, the animator asks the participants to jot down on a piece of paper My low point this week was... My high point this week was...</p> <p>The animator announces that the answers will afterwards be shared with the others.</p> <p>Allow 5 min for them to reflect about their low and high points of the week.</p> <p>Invite people to share what they have jotted down.</p> <p>There is no need for the other members to comment, to defend, to explain...the idea is to give the participant the occasion to share the low and high points of the week.</p> <p>After all have shared, the agenda of the meeting can be tackled.</p>
Bibliography	<p>Adapted from teambuilding exercises https://studentaffairs.lehigh.edu/sites/studentaffairs.lehigh.edu/files/offices/leadership/docs/Teambuilders_and_Activities.pdf</p>

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