

FD Consultants

Psychosocial Support and Trauma Specialist Services

Coronavirus (Covid-19) Deployments and Staying Resilient



As part of the Coronavirus humanitarian response, FD Consultants have been carrying out consultations with humanitarian aid staff preparing to deploy.

Having supported humanitarian staff prior to, during, as well as following deployments for many years and, in consideration of the unique and unprecedented circumstances of Coronavirus deployments, we have consolidated some reflections and considerations.

Coronavirus Deployments

The humanitarian sector recognises how Coronavirus responses will draw parallels to other familiar humanitarian scenes. In terms of deployments this might mean political violence or civil unrest, movement restrictions, curfews, being separated from loved ones with often unreliable internet and little time to communicate name a few. As well as, of course, the variety of related difficulties common to epidemic response, including stigmatization by the local population, managing PPE shortages and, carrying the responsibility for others' lives. These are understood as a 'part of the work'.

Circumstances specific to Coronavirus deployments, on the other hand, are an evolving reality. Humanitarians are being asked to manage additional concerns. For example, as deployed staff you might be the vector of the virus to the vulnerable groups you are supporting. You may also be carrying concern for loved ones back home with you into a deployment aimed at addressing the same 'danger'. Or, having to accept being 'stuck' for a period in your deployment country because of travel restrictions.

Furthermore, as one staff member put it, *"we're very much on borrowed time."* And yet, there is the 14-day mandatory isolation upon arrival, which might include remaining isolated from fellow colleagues staying in the same location. Where, from the relative comfort of your accommodation, you will be supporting 'remotely' the crisis work going on within close proximity to you, knowing that local and other colleagues are 'in the thick of it'. Possibly resulting in experiencing feelings of loneliness, guilt or frustration.

With all this in mind, it is understandable, if not normal, to imagine that even the most well-seasoned humanitarian will feel tested in ways their prior deployments have not.

Coping strategies and resilience in Coronavirus deployments

"You don't know how long it's going to take, how long you will have to be there to be sure things are up and running. You have to accept that before you go and let go of the 'need to know'".

This is how a humanitarian explained the way they manage some of the uncertainties faced in emergency deployments. At the time it struck me that this 'letting go of the need to know' was somehow both practical as well as self-compassionate. Coronavirus deployments not only carry the inherent stresses of emergency deployments but also unique personal and professional dimensions. Both practicality *and* self-compassion could go a long way towards encouraging resilience in such circumstances.

As described by a number of staff, resilience is the ability to balance being highly adaptive to a fast-changing situation and set of needs with maintaining personal and professional boundaries so as not to burnout.

Similarly, it is the ability to know when to say 'I am out for now. I have to sleep, or rest, or be alone', so you can remove yourself before you explode or make an unnecessary mistake. This inner voice that is letting you know it is time to take a break, however brief or inopportune, cannot be ignored.

It is also about appreciating how teamwork is at the root of any successful deployment, as was repeated by all staff. This involves trusting, relying on, as well as supporting your team. Finding ways to communicate what you need to, at the same time letting go of moments of hostility or rudeness 'till after deployment'.

Coping, psychological wellbeing and, perceived sense of control

When we are stressed it is often a product of overwhelm, of feeling out of control. In emergency deployments, particularly at present, where certain variables are entirely unknown, supporting our 'perceived sense of control' is key.

Research into stress related coping styles has shown that '*Engaging*' coping styles support our 'perceived sense of control' and, in turn, our psychological wellbeing. *Active confronting*, for example, refers to directly and consciously facing the stressor, in a "hands on" way. *Reassuring thoughts* allow us to put things in perspective and to look for ways to acknowledge that, "it's not the end of the world."

Unsupportive coping styles, on the other hand, involve what are called *disengagement strategies*. When *passively react*, for example, we "wallow" in negativity, not really addressing the stressor. When we have a *palliative reaction*, we disassociate from the stressor by letting the stressful event numb you. When *avoiding* we don't address the problem directly but instead disengage from the situation and avert attention from it through escapism, wishful thinking, self-isolation, undue emotional restraint, and/or using drugs or alcohol. Sometimes we will shout at a colleague, which might be a sign we haven't listened to the 'switch' telling us it's time to take a break. All of these reactions are natural, even healthy, within limits. When they become the norm is when we need to reassess.

How can FD Consultants support staff?

FD Consultants, through their pre-deployment resilience consultations, psychological evaluations, mid and post deployment consultations, as well as trauma assessments and follow up trauma counselling, are well placed to support staff through all phases and experiences on deployment. Mid and post deployment consultations, as a means to 'checking in' on staff wellbeing, are recommended now, more so than ever, given the particularly intense and unprecedented circumstances in which staff are deploying. These provide an opportunity to talk through some of the deployment specific circumstances they may be facing, and how they can best cope.

About FD Consultants

For organisations looking for employee psychological support, FD Consultants are the trauma specialists and well-being service who will best deliver a reliable, quick, and bespoke support system in the workplace. FD Consultant's team of accredited specialists will offer ongoing support to help manage stress, prevent burnout and provide specialist trauma care where required, enabling your staff with the tools to cope, and recover more quickly.