



Managing risks

Safety and security in human rights work

Well-being and stress management

Human Rights Defenders often navigate highly stressful and hostile environments. Stress can be a significant burden, influencing not only individuals' emotional state but also their physical health, professional and personal lives. To prevent acute and/or chronic stress, it is necessary to recognise the different symptoms one may suffer and consider the factors that may cause stress.

What is stress?

Stress is the body's non-specific response to any demands or challenges it encounters. It can arise from subjective factors, such as a mismatch between expectations and reality, personal beliefs, or attitudes, as well as objective factors, such as living or working conditions, relationships, economic or political pressures, and emergencies. These triggers, whether internal or external, shape how individuals experience and manage stress in their daily lives.

Types of stress

► Positive

Positive stress is a form of short-term stress that boosts motivation, increases efficiency, and is normally easy to handle. It usually ends with relaxation and positive emotions. However, if someone's health is already compromised, positive stress can also have harmful impacts.

► Negative

Negative stress can be short-term or long-term, leading to physical and mental health problems. Distress (short-term) triggers the body's fight-or-flight response, raising heart rate and muscle tension. Once resolved, the body returns to normal. Chronic stress (long-term) on the other hand keeps the body on high alert, exhausting it over time.

It is crucial to recognize these distinctions as even positive and short-term negative stress can become detrimental when a person's health is impaired or their ability to recover is restricted.

Effects of stress

Stress, whether short-term or long-term, affects the brain and influences various systems in the body, such as metabolism, the heart, and immune system. These changes can lead to harmful health effects and behaviours.

Common signs of chronic stress include headaches, fatigue, rapid heartbeats, digestive issues, frequent colds, anxiety, depression, poor concentration, and sleep problems.

Individuals may develop negative behaviours like substance misuse, overeating, or social disengagement. Their relationships may suffer, productivity may decline, and sleep routines may be disturbed.

Stress can compromise individuals' ability to do their work or perform day-to-day tasks, which can eventually result in anxiety, depression, or other conditions. Individuals' troubles with focus and productivity can lead to slower work pace and increased use of sick days. Excessive stress depresses morale, which disengages and demotivates workers, fostering a hostile environment, and impairing communication and teamwork.

► Note

It is important to remember that all the physical manifestations of stress mentioned could also be signs of other medical conditions. If these symptoms persist, consult a doctor to rule out any underlying health issues.

How does stress affect the various systems in our body?

▶ **Central nervous system (brain)**

Long-term stress impairs memory, focus, and decision-making by interfering with brain function. The brain regions in charge of learning and emotional control may decrease due to prolonged exposure to stress hormones like cortisol, making people more susceptible to mental illnesses like anxiety and depression.

▶ **Immune system**

Prolonged stress weakens the immune system, increasing vulnerability to illnesses and infections. It can cause inflammation, which has been connected to autoimmune illnesses and other chronic health issues.

▶ **Vascular system**

Prolonged stress raises the risk of cardiovascular illnesses like heart attacks, strokes, and high blood pressure.

▶ **Digestive system**

Prolonged stress can cause changes in appetite, digestion, ulcers, acid reflux, and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

▶ **Bone-muscle system**

Chronic stress raises cortisol levels, which can weaken muscles and bones (osteoporosis), causing pain, tension, and even long-term mobility issues.

▶ **Respiratory system**

Because chronic stress narrows the airways and raises inflammation, it can exacerbate respiratory conditions like bronchitis and asthma.

▶ **Reproductive system**

Prolonged stress can throw off hormone balances, which can cause sexual dysfunction and issues with fertility.

Risk response strategies and examples of stress-related threats



AVOID

Eliminate the risk completely by not doing the activity that might cause the risk.

OR



MITIGATE or REDUCE

Develop and implement security measures that scale down the impact and likelihood of the risk.

OR



SHARE or TRANSFER

Partially or fully share the risk with someone else.

OR



ACCEPT

Acknowledge the risk and do nothing about it.











GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR DECISION-MAKING



Please keep in mind that these are just examples, and the strategies explored may not necessarily apply to your specific context.

1 Emotional burnout









Emotional burnout is a state of physical and mental exhaustion, resulting from prolonged stress, often arising from personal or work-related matters.

		Responsibility	
	AVOID	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Time management policy Introduce a no overtime policy to avoid excessive workload. 	
OR			
	MITIGATE or REDUCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Programs for work-life balance Offer services including mental health days, flexible work schedules, and assistance with personal obligations. 	 
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Wellness Initiatives To lessen emotional tiredness, provide training on stress management, or counselling sessions, or activities like yoga and meditation. 	
OR			
	SHARE or TRANSFER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ External psychological support Set up Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to provide psychological support. 	
OR			
	ACCEPT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Acknowledging stress in workplace Set expectations: when stress is a part of the workplace, people and managers can acknowledge that heavy workloads might happen during peak hours, but they should be aware of necessary boundaries. 	 

2 Compassion fatigue

Compassion fatigue is a secondary traumatic stress occurring from regular work with traumatized individuals.

Responsibility

	<p>AVOID</p>	<p>▶ Rotational shifts or job redesign Redesign staff member’s roles and responsibility to avoid recurrent exposure to traumatised individuals.</p>	
OR			
	<p>MITIGATE or REDUCE</p>	<p>▶ Self-care programs Organise a training on crisis management and resilience, encourage self-care practice.</p>	
OR			
	<p>SHARE or TRANSFER</p>	<p>▶ External psychological support Hire a consultant to support staff members.</p>	
OR			
	<p>ACCEPT</p>	<p>▶ Recognizing emotional strain Encourage frequent check-ins with management while acknowledging the emotional difficulties that come with caregiving responsibilities and accepting that sometimes exhaustion is natural.</p>	

3 Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is a mental health condition caused by an extremely stressful or terrifying event.

Responsibility

	AVOID	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Clear mandate limitations Offset certain types of work to external experts. 	
OR			
	MITIGATE or REDUCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Trauma support programs Provide access to therapy and counselling for workers who have experienced traumatic situations at work, such as emergency responders and healthcare professionals. ▶ Peer support networks Establish peer support networks so that staff members can talk about their experiences in a secure setting. 	
OR			
	SHARE or TRANSFER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Insurance coverage Provide specific mental health insurance that includes coverage for counselling and PTSD therapies. 	
OR			
	ACCEPT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Recognizing the impact It is common for people with PTSD to take time off or request accommodations for their needs. Taking it slow is a normal part of their recovery. 	