Emotional health of social workers

WEBINAR SUMMARY
January 13, 2016

I. Presenter:

Natalie-Ann McCauley is a well-known international child protection expert with over 18 years of work in the field, 16 of which were spent internationally. She is based in Australia, working for an organization called Humanitarian Wellbeing, which focuses on providing emotional health solutions to humanitarian workers.

II. Content:

Mrs. McCauley started her presentation by emphasizing that the participants would:

1. Have an overview of recent research on psychosocial well-being of those in the field;
2. Identify gaps in self-care plans for oneself and others;
3. Learn how to develop self-care plans, including by learning of resources.

The expert proceeded to asking the participants why they believe safe-care is important in their type of work. Those responding mentioned that it is to prevent burnout, have better work rates and care for beneficiaries and deal with vicarious trauma.

Mrs. McCauley emphasized that daily safe-care leads to better work results. Many dedicated humanitarian workers are lost, due to secondary trauma and emotional disturbances. They are often very productive initially, but after six-eight months they start to change and react in ways that can jeopardize their career.

She briefly explained brain development, by stressing that the first part of the brain developed at a very early stage is the brainstem. This part of the brain regulates physiological states, such as fear, heart rate, oxygen intake. It is essentially the survival part of the brain, critical to the development of the rest of the brain and the least plastic part. Ninety percent of the brain is developed until the age of 4, while the latter 10 during adolescence when people take more risks. The brainstem is where the brain’s reactions to threat exist: it goes on alert in dangerous situations, reacting to threats and preparing to respond through ‘flight, fright or freeze.’

Mrs. McCauley emphasized that the typical reactions to threats include:

1. Physical: lack of energy, tense muscles, lack of energy, sweating
2. Changes of thinking: flashbacks, only thinking about the problem, inability to trust others
3. Changes in emotions: feeling angry, sad, hopeless or not feeling anything.
4. Behavior changes: no eating or sleeping, overly aggressive or withdrawn, hostility.
She stressed that these are normal reactions to abnormal situations. In the humanitarian field, the focus is on the beneficiaries, not the workers, which has a tremendous impact on the latter’s family, especially children.

A recent student of the Humanitarian Wellbeing, which received 167 responses from humanitarian workers in level three missions working for UN and its missions. It was circulated widely and had 74% female responses, while 53% of all respondents were aged 25-40. Out of all, 91% self-reported that they are under profound stress or experiencing traumatic experiences. 61% revealed that direct threats to their lives and colleagues is their greatest stress, while 82% mentioning that threats of sexual violence was their highest stress. More than 90% emphasizes that they were not satisfied with their life and career.

For most of them, it was easier to recognize stress in colleagues rather than themselves. The expert asked the participants how they recognize their colleagues are not doing well. They mentioned that they notice increased lack of interest, tiredness and lack of sleep. Conflicts and aggressions always come up as well. She further added passiveness, under- or overwork, crying and being emotional, negative emails and communication. It is important to encourage teams to get support, even before signs start appearing, self-care should be scheduled into the day. Some of those suffering display martyr-like behavior, are self-medicating, show high-risk behaviors, limited self-care and depression.

Many webinar participants took a survey before the webinar and discovered that they were not doing well when it came to self-care, which is not unusual under situations of profound stress. While this may be normal, actions need to be taken, by scheduling daily self-care activities, including exercise, meditating, watching comedies or any other form of ensuring laughter. One larger activity should be integrated once a week. At least one day of the week needs to be free, focused on contacting people outside work and conducting activities outside work.

The expert asked the participants what they considered self-care methods to be. They responded by mentioning elements such as sports, yoga, exercising, books, eating well, being alone and seeing movies. She stressed that caring for oneself is an act of survival, not an indulgence, as we often then to think about it.

There is a need to change the perception of hard-core humanitarian worker, by setting examples, showing that self-care leads to more efficient and consistent work, which is something that many organizations and managers have yet to recognize and are therefore falling behind on it. It is important to change that culture and show empowers that productivity and high-quality work is the result of taking good care of their employees. In fact, employees who are stressed out are actually hindering the beneficiaries’ development, as they keep moving every six months to new high-risk locations and situations.

Mrs. McCauley ended the webinar by mentioning that the Humanitarian WellBeing website contains many tools and resources for managers and individuals to map out self-care plans and strategies. Some of the tactics include meditation and sitting quiet for 10 minutes in the morning or evening, exercising and dancing.

When asked how to explain the need of self-care to others around us, the expert mentioned that it is best to not mention it as a personal issue, but generally mention that recognizing that people perform better when taking care of themselves. This doesn’t put people in a position of vulnerability and leads to broader conversations.