



Caring for colleagues: how to help without being a psychologist

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Abstract: Five evidence-based strategies are offered to support the mental wellbeing of humanitarian colleagues—without being a psychologist. Grounded in academic research, these strategies provide practical tools to care for others responsibly, without overstepping or causing unintended harm.

The humanitarian sector is built on compassion, resilience, and commitment, but even professionals are not immune to stress, burnout, or simply: emotions. With prolonged exposure to high-stakes environments, trauma, and uncertainty, mental strain can accumulate quickly. While psychological services are crucial, not everyone in the field has immediate access to professional help. Therefore, what can field officers, logisticians, coordinators, administrators in the humanitarian sector do to support each other mentally, without overstepping or unintentionally doing harm?

With the help of psychology and humanitarian health literature, here are five effective, research-informed ways to support a colleague's mental wellbeing when there is not a mental health professional available.

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Offering ‘psychological first aid’

Most humanitarian aid workers have probably had the opportunity to do a First Aid course. They are taught that First Aid is not medical treatment but helps the situation until professionals are ready to take over, or to stabilize the situation until the body can cure itself. Therefore, Psychological First Aid (PFA) is not a therapy. The [Inter-Agency Standing Committee](#) (IASC) has explained that it is a set of simple, humane principles that can be applied when someone is in distress: look, listen, and link. IASC has emphasised that PFA should be the first line of support in emergencies — not only by psychologists, but by peers in the field.

In doing so, a person does not need to ‘solve’ anything. Instead, it is possible to:

- look for signs of distress (withdrawal, irritability, exhaustion);
- listen with genuine attention — without judgment, advice, or pressure;
- link to resources — whether that is a team leader or a mental health professional, or even just rest.

It is critical to remember that PFA is about empowerment, not diagnosing or counseling. It does not require or entail exploring trauma. It is just good to create a calm, nonjudgmental space and let the person choose what to share.

Encouraging peer-to-peer support

Humans are social creatures, and peer support is one of the most protective factors for mental health in high-stress environments. Research by [Brooks et al.](#) has found that humanitarian workers who felt socially supported by peers were significantly less likely to develop long-term psychological distress, even after exposure to traumatic events. How can humanitarians do this in a work setting?

- Create regular check-ins that are not work-related
- Normalise talking about wellbeing during team meetings

The key is consistency. As [Miller and Rasmussen](#) have noted, social support only acts as a buffer against stress when it is sustained and embedded in daily interactions—not just occasional check-ins.

Practicing self-care without romanticizing resilience

Humanitarian workers often feel pressure to be the ‘strong one’. But if individuals constantly push themselves without pause, there is a risk of reinforcing a dangerous culture of burnout. Showing personal limits and self-care practices helps others feel safe doing the same.

The [World Health Organization](#) has highlighted that modeling healthy behaviors—such as taking breaks, respecting boundaries, and prioritising rest—is a powerful tool to reduce stress contagion in high-pressure teams. Furthermore, [Brown](#) has argued that

vulnerability and authenticity in leadership create psychologically safer work environments. Thus, how can humanitarian workers do this during their work? It is better to try saying ‘I need a 15-minute reset—want to walk with me?’, instead of pushing through.

Using active listening and validation

One of the things humanitarian workers hear a lot when struggling is ‘It could be worse’, or ‘You’ll be fine, don’t worry’. Though well-intentioned, it can invalidate real pain. Instead, it is better to use active listening. [Carl Rogers](#), one of the founding fathers of humanistic psychology, has demonstrated that empathy and authenticity can be more healing than advice. When someone opens up, it is good to try saying: ‘Do you want to talk or just sit together for a bit?’; ‘You don’t have to be okay all the time.’ The key take-away here is again: do not feel the need to fix anything. Presence is often enough. Which brings us to the last point.

Knowing personal limits and referring them when needed

Perhaps the most important rule: knowing when to step back. If someone shows signs of serious distress, it is time to encourage professional support. As is known too well in field work, the main principle is to do no harm. The [Sphere Handbook](#) addresses that the attempts to help beyond one’s scope can backfire or delay proper care. Instead, it is better to try saying: ‘What you are going through must be tough, and I think someone trained could really help’. If no services are available, it is good to speak to a supervisor, safeguarding focal point, or team leader.

Kindness is not a degree, but it matters

There is no need for a psychology degree to support colleagues. What truly matters is awareness, care, and humility. In the field, we are constantly challenged—not only by the complexity of the work but also by the weight of witnessing difficult situations up close. From a personal perspective, fieldwork has brought me its fair share of doubt and uncertainty, especially at the beginning of a mission. Will I be able to handle this role? Will I connect with my colleagues? Will I know what to do when someone is struggling? Looking back, some of the most meaningful moments were not captured in reports or debriefs, but in the conversations between colleagues. As I embark on a new mission, I still think about many of those exchanges. In my experience, this is how we managed to work better—by building trust and mutual understanding. We were able to adapt, lean on each other, and step in or step back when the situation required it. By practicing PFA, fostering connection, practicing (personal) wellbeing, listening deeply, and knowing when to refer, humanitarians can make their workplaces safer and more humane. They often care deeply, and this is what makes their job beautiful. Let’s care for each other just as fiercely!