

## THREE TYPES OF STRESS ASSOCIATED WITH HUMANITARIAN WORK



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The following are the three main types of traumatic stress associated with humanitarian work:

### Trauma / Critical Incident Stress

**Trauma** is the reaction that occurs when the demands of stressful events exceed our available coping resources and result in severe distress

**Critical incident stress** is a term used to refer to trauma reactions that occur as a result of a traumatic event during which harm or death seriously threatens an individual.

Examples of such events include being assaulted, being within range of gunfire, being shot at or bombed and being in situations where many people are dying. This type of event is often referred to as a critical incident.

***Experiencing some trauma reactions after a critical incident may be a normal response to an abnormal situation***

### Vicarious Trauma

**Vicarious trauma** refers to the stress (and sometimes trauma) reactions that can occur in response to hearing about traumatic events that have happened to others.

This exposure can come from direct contact with trauma survivors or from exposure to graphic descriptions of violence or victimization. It is usually accompanied by a sense of responsibility and a desire to help

***These reactions may be due a transformation in the helper's inner experience as a result of empathetic engagement with traumatic material.***

### Chronic Stress

**Cumulative stress reactions** are less dramatic types of stress reactions that are more gradual in their development. They are usually related to lower-intensity but more chronic stressors that pervade a person's life and "pile up" one on top of the other.

Examples of common occupation-related chronic stressors include poor preparation and briefing, excessive workloads, tight deadlines, being asked to undertake tasks outside your level of training or competence, repeatedly hearing distressing stories and witnessing distressing events, facing moral dilemmas, separation from family and friends, and chronic sleep deprivation.

***Exposure to elevated levels of chronic stress over extended periods of time can lead to burnout.***