

SABRINA PRIOLI

# HOW COACHING CAN PREVENT & SUPPORT BURNOUT RECOVERY

---

Sabrina Prioli  
Certified Professional Coactive Coach (CPCC)  
Associate Certified Coach (ACC)  
[www.sabrinaprioli.com](http://www.sabrinaprioli.com)



## Difficult contexts and stress management

Mental health issues have been stigmatized in the past, causing people to avoid seeking professional help. This should not be the case and, professional counseling and coaches may be the appropriate course of action. Many larger international organizations provide mental health support and coaching as part of their medical/professional benefits. However, many organizations and NGOs are not able to offer counseling and coaching services as part their employee benefit package.

For many aid workers and especially those working in a hardship duty station, chronic stress and burnout are unfortunately considered the norms of the job. They work in an environment where they are constantly exposed to,



either directly or indirectly, traumatic and distressing situations; they may be working with victims of violence and conflict, they may be deployed to dangerous and hostile locations and be exposed to situations where their safety is at risk, and they often work long and unsociable hours.

They have limited personal space and opportunity to indulge in pleasurable and restful activities and are constantly functioning in "urgent mode".

Violence, kidnapping, car-jacking, assault, and even death – the risks facing humanitarian aid workers are plentiful. Kristalina Georgieva, the European commissioner for international co-operation, humanitarian aid and crisis response, described humanitarian aid as "one of the world's most dangerous professions". British Red Cross international human resources adviser Tom Eseanobi says that if aid workers suffer burnout, or perhaps increase their use of alcohol or drugs, they may feel empty or begin to doubt their religious beliefs. "It [burnout] may lead to poor concentration, forgetfulness, or no longer feeling compassion for the people you are meant to be supporting – if this is the case, there's no point you being there," he says.

In crisis and emergency settings, staff are expected to perform under pressure from various sources with often very limited support to their physical and mental health. For aid workers, burning out is a sign of weakness and inability to operate under stressful situations and should be handled independently.

Often many organizations provide minimal support for staff to cope with stress and burnout. There are very few professionals who are trained in stress management, counseling, and coaching.

# Symptoms of Burnout

## **The most common risk factors for burnout are:**

- Continuous exposure to risk
- Conflict of values
- Excessive work overload
- Lack of control
- Insufficient reward
- Lack of equity
- Lack of social relationships
- Lack of communication and support

The responses to difficulties in the humanitarian sector are: acute stress, chronic stress, traumatic stress, occupational stress, vicarious trauma, secondary traumatization, compassion fatigue, post-traumatic stress.

## **The most common symptoms of burnout are:**

- **Physical and emotional exhaustion**
- **Chronic fatigue and apathy**
- **Insomnia**
- **Disorders of appetite**
- **Loss of enthusiasm for work**
- **Anguish and fear of going to work**
- **Irritation and anger**
- **Memory problems**
- **Lack of interest and isolation**
- **Disillusionment in career**
- **Cynicism and pessimism**

# Coaching & Burnout

Coaching can be a tool to support aid workers to recover from burnout in the following ways:

- Empowering the strength and fiercely taking care of themselves and others.
- Strengthen and honor personal values.
- Explore the concept of "fulfilling life"
- Connecting with life purpose.
- Building up muscles of mental fitness responding to life challenges with a positive rather than a negative mindset.
- Building self-awareness, self-authority, healthy relationships, and peak performances.
- Develop and enhance humanitarian leadership behaviors
- Establish reasonable and realistic expectations
- Look at own situation from different perspectives.



Coaching can help workers transform their perspective's situations, feel more supported of his/her work and life, and take key steps and sustainable habits towards.

As an aid worker who has experienced the effects of PTSD and burnout, I can attest to most of the symptoms listed above.

Even so, I had to force myself into recovery. In my personal case, I needed to work first with an EMDR specialist. Subsequently, I worked with a Coach who accompanied me in my recovery process, exploring my core beliefs and reworking my work and life commitments.

Through coaching I was able to put my life plan into action.

I became a Co-Active Professional Coach (CPC - ACC). My own recovery formed the inspiration for me to train as a coach to support others in their burnout prevention and recovery.

## REFERENCES

Blogs, research and publications

Co-Active Coaching

-Henry Kimsey-House, Karen Kimsey-House, Phillip Sandahl, Laura Whitworth (2018)

Psychological Distress, Depression, Anxiety, and Burnout among International Humanitarian Aid Workers: A Longitudinal Study

-Lopez Cardoso B, Gotway Crawford C, Eriksson C, Zhu J, Sabin M, (2012)

Stress and staff support strategies for international aid work

-Penelope Curling, Kathleen B. Simmons (2010)

Humanitarian's aid worker's mental health and duty of care

-L. Jachens (2019)

Managing work-related stress in humanitarian fieldwork: Aid workers and resilience resources

-G. Schmidt (2017)

Positive Intelligence

-Shirzad Chamine (2016)

Effort-reward imbalance and burnout among humanitarian aid workers

-L. Jachens, R. Thomas, J. Houdmont (2019)

Changing Aid – [www.changingaid.com](http://www.changingaid.com)

TED Talks on Burnout – <https://www.ted.com/playlist/245/>

Work-related stress in a humanitarian context: A qualitative investigation

-Liza Jachens, J. Houdmont, R. Thomas (2018)

Working well? Aid Worker Well-being and How to Improve it

-CHS Alliance Mapping: Melissa Pitotti & MaryAnn Clements (2020)