Surviving as an Aid Worker

HOW TO STAY ALIVE, SANE, AND HEALTHY ON HUMANITARIAN ASSIGNMENTS

by Matthew Bolton and Emily Weitz

An assignment with a humanitarian or development agency will likely throw you into a situation that is completely foreign to your experience. You may be sent to a new country or region, work with a new organization, or encounter new subcultures. Sudden immersion in a new context can be disorienting. You may feel ignorant, confused, angry, unable to understand people's behavior and reactions. Fortunately, there are ways to prepare yourself intellectually, emotionally, and physically for the challenges and adventures that await you.

UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION

It is paramount that you become familiar with the situation—in the country, in your locality, and in your organization. This is especially true if you are in a rapidly changing environment like a natural disaster or conflict. Find out all you can about the national and local culture, politics, economy, and society. Find out who is in charge, the local sources of income, and the way local people spend their free time. If you are going to a particularly dangerous area, make sure you are fully aware of the security situation, the location of minefields, no-go areas, and the frontlines.

You need to gather information voraciously and engage with it critically (never take anything at face value). Learn the local language(s) so you can understand what people are saying around you and the subtleties of expression. Read everything about the country you can get your hands on—newspapers (both local and international), books, novels, journal articles, aid agency reports, and needs assessments. Watch local films, and pay attention to local TV and radio. Attend briefings and training sessions offered by other aid agencies. Get to know people who seem to have a knack for understanding what is happening. Don’t be afraid to ask questions—find people who will not judge you for asking about seemingly obvious things. Finally, a little humility will go a long way. Recognize that as a foreigner you will always be an outsider and the kind of situations you will work in are incredibly complex. In short, says former Mali Peace Corps volunteer Angie Elliott-Koene, the key is to “be open, curious, and engaged.”

This will not only help you personally, but it also will improve your work immensely. Too many aid projects are designed and implemented without regard to local circumstances—leading to embarrassing failures, which can make the situation even worse.

DEFINE YOUR JOB

Unfortunately, the neat and carefully drafted job description handed to you by your head office typically has absolutely nothing to do with your real job in the field. Many people entering humanitarian and development work for the first time are surprised when they are given tasks for which they have no training. I (Matthew) went to Bosnia intending to focus on public relations and organizational development issues and ended up starting a landmine clearance project.

You will need to be flexible and willing to adapt to the realities on the ground. Your job description may have been written several months before by head-quarters staff who needed it to match some pro forma document or a donor’s requirements. Needs in the field may be completely different, and the situation may have changed so rapidly that your original job is no longer a priority.

Having no sense of what you are supposed to be doing can be incredibly draining. Undirected energy can soon turn to apathy or to hastily constructed projects with little purpose. Review your scope of work with your colleagues as soon as you arrive and throughout your stay. Ask them what kind of gaps exist in staffing, explain your particular skill set, and create a job description that fulfills local needs and is satisfying for you. “Clarity of what you’re there to do is paramount for fulfillment, but be creative in seeing what needs to be done and adapt,” says Aidan Timlin of Christian Aid, who has much experience in Africa.

Try to ensure your involvement in projects and tasks that you find meaningful and help you grow as a human being (emotionally, in terms of skills, or in experience). Feeling unchallenged, over-worked, or confined to mundane trivialities can be incredibly soul-destroying. Remember the big ideas—justice, peace, solidarity, service—that drove you to be an aid worker in the first place.
“Many of my international colleagues call me idealistic, but I remind them that the very existence of our organization hinges on shared ideals,” says Jenet Redfern, who works in Bosnia. “I continue to work as an optimist.”

Once you have defined what you will do, make sure you clarify your position in the organization with your colleagues. Who do you report to? Who reports to you? What kind of authority do you have? What decisions are you allowed to make independently? Doing this early on will help avoid or mitigate conflict later. “Power struggles in the workplace are difficult,” says Laura Rudert, who works with Counterpart International in Senegal. “It’s important that everyone understands your position both in the entire structure and in relation to them.”

Finally, it is important as an aid worker to think about the long-term sustainability of your work. Can elements of your job be done by local staff or other local organizations? If so, think about building local capacity. After all, the goal of development and humanitarian aid is to work yourself out of a job.

BUILD COMMUNITY

One of the gifts and burdens of working in the world of aid is that suddenly your community transcends international boundaries. When you first move to a new place you will feel pangs of loneliness for the communities of people you have left behind. Bring pictures of your family and friends with you. These pictures will comfort you and provide an easy way to connect to new people. For me (Emily), sharing pictures of my parents and of my home in snowy Michigan has been a great way for me to form new surrogate families in other places. Stay in touch with people from home. The rapidly expanding world of global technology means that more places have access to the Internet. Email and instant messaging provide a relatively easy way to keep in touch with family and friends.

Your job will provide you with a place to encounter colleagues who may become friends. Expatriate networks will be a place where you may feel naturally at ease. Find out where other expats hang out and get to know them. It is often very comforting to find people who have similar histories (and often a similar sense of humor!) to spend time with. At the same time, do not isolate yourself only with expats. While you may naturally share the most in common with them or with colleagues, it is important to form support systems beyond your job. Local people will eventually notice and resent the aid workers that seem unable to transcend cultural boundaries in their friendships.

Friendships with local people are more difficult to form but are ultimately deeply rewarding and should be nurtured carefully. The patient local person who will introduce you to their everyday life and routines offers you one of the most precious gifts of your time abroad. Local people will unveil your new world to you in a way that you cannot imagine. It is through these friendships that you will truly become part of your new community.

It may be tempting to engage in a romantic relationship as a way of combating the periodic loneliness of life abroad. While having an intimate partner will provide you with a comfortable and reliable person to depend on, consider the implications of this relationship seriously. Forming a primary bond with one other person will isolate you to a certain degree from others in the community. No other realm of human relationship is as...
laden with cultural norms as dating and you should avoid exploring this until you more fully understand the standards for behavior in your new environment. Exercise special caution if the romantic relationship is with a local person, as such connections are fraught with power dynamics and cultural issues that must be navigated with extreme care. While many aid workers date and even eventually marry local people, all advise waiting until you are quite familiar and comfortable with your surroundings before exploring attraction to another person.

**TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF**

Those of us who choose to leave the comfort and familiarity of our own cultures for the unknown variables of development work generally do so because we feel drawn to helping other people. We are generally caretakers, people who enjoy helping other people. Ironically, as a group, we are outstandingly poor at taking care of ourselves and find it easy to take care of everyone else at the expense of our own health and sanity.

In terms of physical health, your body is being exposed to an overwhelming number of stimuli in the forms of new foods, new routines, new climate, and new contagions. Be patient with your body and do not push yourself too hard. Getting enough sleep is particularly crucial. Bringing simple things like insect repellent, allergy medicine, ibuprofen, dental floss, tampons, vitamins, and your preferred form of birth control will go a long way toward your overall wellbeing. Remember to keep a water bottle with you at all times, particularly in tropical climates. Dehydration will wear down your immune system and make you more susceptible to disease. We often pack energy bars, which provide a quick burst of energy, especially during our first days in a new place where our eating schedules may be erratic. Before leaving home, be certain to get a full medical and dental work-up. Try to maintain some sort of an exercise routine whatever it be running, yoga, or simple stretching. Keeping your body healthy will contribute greatly to your physical and mental health.

Living outside your familiar context is a mentally, emotionally, and spiritually taxing experience. Even once you have survived the initial culture shock, daily life in a new place can often overwhelm your coping mechanisms. Aid workers are constantly exposed to human suffering, only adding to this stress. Accept that fact that you will not single-handedly change the history, infrastructure, and structural violence that has created the misery you see around you. Believe that your contribution means something. Abandon stoicism and choose a few dear friends from home with whom to share your feelings, worries, and experiences. These people will help keep you sane and remind you who you are and where you’ve been in the midst of psychological

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**DEVELOPMENT WORK RESOURCES**

**MUST-HAVE BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS**


UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies. This book is a classic and is especially helpful if you are dealing with refugees. See chapters 20-24 for advice on taking care of your welfare and that of your colleagues. Available free online at: www.the-ecentre.net/resources/e_library/doc/lan_Em.pdf.

United States Peace Corps Handbooks and Training Resources. There are many excellent resources on this webpage, especially the handbooks on culture, written by one of the world's oldest and most experienced volunteer agencies: www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=library.

**ADDITIONAL HANDBOOKS**


Managing the Stress of Humanitarian Emergencies, a UNHCR manual: Available online: www.the-ecentre.net/resources/e_library/doc/managingStress.PDF.


Security Awareness: An Aide Memoire, published by UNHCR and available online: www.the-ecentre.net/resources/e_library/doc/7-SECAWE.PDF.

**WEBSITES**

Aid Workers Network, an online forum for aid workers: www.aidworkers.net. See the page on "Being an Aid Worker": www.aidworkers.net/personal/index.html.

RedR offers good training courses on many aspects of being an aid worker: www.redr.org.

Center for Humanitarian Psychology is an NGO that can "provide psychological support to humanitarian workers": www.humanitarian-psy.org/pages/default_en.asp.

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trauma. Keep a journal to record what you see and feel. Remember that it is okay to feel angry, frustrated, helpless, or exhausted.

It can be very tempting to ease some of the pain of adjusting to a new place by using drugs, cigarettes, or alcohol. This is especially the case when certain substances or drinks play an important role in local culture. However, remember that any comfort from these is artificial and the dangers of addiction are weighty. "Beware. It is dead easy to become too friendly with cigarettes and alcohol," says one aid worker and journalist with experience in Bosnia and Kosovo. "Seeing corpses/death/suffering provides one with plenty of excuses to drink, and smoking fits in with the self-image of the world-weary aid worker."

Finally, allow yourself to take vacations. Often aid workers deny themselves any sort of luxury that the local people do not also have. This is not productive and will contribute to your burnout. If a simple treat like nail polish, a trip to the cinema, or a frivolous magazine makes you happy, try to indulge yourself. Most of us have families who want desperately to help us in some way—allow such people to send care packages and treat you.

Working in the world of development can be an incredibly rewarding experience that provides an opportunity to get to know the richness and texture of different cultures while genuinely trying to end human suffering. We hope that you will find your work abroad as fulfilling, challenging, and meaningful as we have.

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