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## UNIT 2

# Stress and relaxation

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### **Learning objectives**

After studying this unit you should be able to:

1. Understand how people find themselves under high levels of stress.
  2. Identify people under high levels of stress.
  3. Advise people how to deal with their stress.
  4. Use group activities to help deal with stress.
  5. Tell people about stress.
  6. Teach relaxation exercises.
  7. Understand how massage reduces tension.
  8. Advise people how to sleep better.
  9. Teach breathing exercises.
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All refugees experience stress. Some suffer more than others from its effects. Many causes of stress can be prevented or reduced, thus greatly improving a person's mental and physical health.

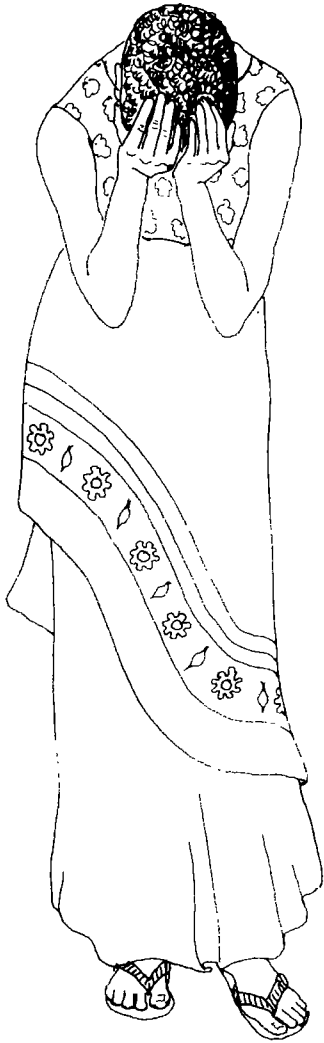
### **Why people find themselves under high levels of stress**

Some stress is normal. When people feel threatened, they have a natural and positive tendency to defend and protect themselves or to flee. These reactions can be seen by an increase in muscle tension, quicker breathing and a faster heartbeat. When people feel that the threat is over, they relax. During this relaxation their muscles grow soft, their heartbeat slows down and they breathe more slowly and regularly. They feel calm and are able to rest and restore their energy. In most people these reactions of activation and relaxation are in balance.

Refugees, however, often experience enormous amounts of stress. This may be because they do not know where their relatives are, or because they feel

insecure about their future, or for various other reasons. Refugees may continue to be distressed even when there is no direct threat. Because of this, their muscles may feel tense all the time. This tension can cause physical complaints which may in turn worry them. These worries may then increase the tension in their muscles and make the physical complaints worse. In other words, they get caught in a spiral of increasing anxiety and physical complaints.

Relaxation exercises can help to break this spiral of tension and physical complaints. By learning how to reduce tension, people feel more relaxed and can rest better. They worry less at moments when they do not need to worry and their physical problems trouble them less.



**Individuals under stress can suffer from tiredness, headaches and other problems**

## **How to recognize people with high levels of stress**

Stress comes from unpleasant experiences and living conditions. It can disturb the mind and body. Stress causes unhappiness and prevents people from doing useful work. It is important to identify people who are suffering from a lot of stress.

A person's behaviour may also create or reduce stress. Following simple advice and using relaxation techniques can give relief from stress.

Stress may affect all areas of a person's life, causing:

- mental distress;
- physical symptoms;
- changed behaviour;
- problems in relationships with other people.

Individuals suffering from stress often do not complain about stress directly. Instead they complain of many different physical and mental symptoms. They may even develop illnesses that require medical treatment.

### ***Symptoms and signs of stress***

Individuals under stress may have any of a variety of symptoms.

Symptoms of stress in the mind

- Anxiety or getting angry easily.
- Sadness, crying or feelings of helplessness.
- Moods that change quickly.
- Poor concentration, needing to be told things several times before understanding and remembering them.
- Thinking about the same things again and again.

People may find it hard to describe their symptoms.

Symptoms of stress in the body

- Tiredness.
- Headache.
- Tense muscles.
- Palpitations or irregular heartbeat.

- Feeling as though one cannot get enough air.
- Nausea (feeling sick) or pains in the abdomen.
- Poor appetite.
- Vague pains, for example in the arms, legs, or chest.
- Disturbed monthly cycle in women.

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### ***Fatigue or intense tiredness***

One of the problems many refugees experience is a very strong fatigue or intense tiredness. Tiredness can be caused by many physical complaints such as anaemia. If you feel that people you are trying to help have any physical complaints, refer them to a doctor.

Tiredness can, obviously, also be caused by lack of sleep. Find out whether the person you are trying to help has somewhere comfortable and quiet to sleep. For more advice on helping people to sleep better, see page 28.

Also remember that fatigue or intense tiredness can, in itself, be a symptom of stress. All the techniques in this unit can help people who have fatigue caused by stress.

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People may have many different symptoms which come and go. If someone has a fever or is losing weight or develops symptoms that do not go away, advise him or her to go to a health centre. For example, chronic stress may cause an ulcer. The health worker can check for other causes of stomach pains such as inflammation of the stomach which may be caused by hookworm or excessive use of alcohol, sometimes together with malnutrition.

#### Symptoms of stress in behaviour

- Reduced activity, no energy.
- Overactivity and inability to rest (restlessness).
- Taking alcohol or drugs such as cannabis or opium to relieve tension.
- Difficulty in concentrating on one task.
- Sleep problems (reduced or disturbed sleep, too much sleep or sleep during the day).

Someone who cannot do useful work, for no obvious reason, may be suffering from stress. To be sure that the person does not have a more serious disturbance such as depression or panic attacks, see Unit 4, *Common mental disorders*.

Symptoms of stress in relationships with other people

- Lack of emotion.
- Arguments and disagreements.
- Too much dependence on others for decisions and support.

***How to find out the cause of the person's problems***

It is important to talk to members of the family or to others who know the person well. First you need to know if the current behaviour is normal for this person. Then you should ask in what ways the individual's state is not normal.

Try to find out about the possible causes and nature of the stress. Ask carefully about the experiences people have gone through. Find out about their current position and the future plans of the family or community. What is their political and legal status? Will they have to move again? Is there any information available about missing relatives or friends?

It is important to realize that the symptoms and signs listed above can sometimes be found in people with chronic functional complaints (also called somatizers), people suffering from depression, people suffering from anxiety disorders, or people who drink too much alcohol.

If a person has a *functional complaint*, the physical symptoms are the expression of an underlying personal or social problem. It would be useful to study Unit 3, *Functional complaints*, before you start to try to help these people.

People with *depression* have more serious complaints. They are more irritable and sad, have no energy and lose weight. Depressed people not only have difficulty falling asleep but they also wake up early. Often they do not do things that are normal in their culture, like chatting with people, taking part in rituals or preparing meals. They may have had the problem before; their depression may have come and gone in the past. The ways in which depression differs from stress are dealt with more fully in Unit 4, page 42.

People with *anxiety disorder* also have more serious complaints. They may have symptoms like sweating, hot and cold flushes, a pounding heart, and strong feelings of anxiety or panic. The difference between stress and anxiety disorder is dealt with in Unit 3. During panic attacks, people may breathe in an unusual way. This is called hyperventilation. The treatment for hyperventilation is dealt with on page 29.

You can often recognize people who are *drinking too much alcohol* by the smell of alcohol or the trembling of their hands (see Unit 7, page 101).

If the family or person has gone through very shocking experiences, first read Unit 8, *Helping victims of torture and other violence*, page 110. If you decide

that the person needs counselling, as described in Unit 8, first do the relaxation exercises as described in this unit. Do not start the counselling as in Unit 8 until you have taught the relaxation exercises described in this unit.

### **Advising people how to deal with stress**

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#### ***People need to be encouraged to change their behaviour in order to:***

- restore the normal pattern of sleep at night, and engage in useful and enjoyable activity in the day;
  - find positive ways of dealing with stress;
  - stop harmful ways of dealing with stress.
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People under stress find it difficult to relax and should be taught special relaxation exercises. These are the most important aspect of treating someone with stress. There are many ways of relaxing, such as reading, singing, listening to music or just resting. Ask people what they normally do to relax and encourage them to go on doing it.

Try to put isolated individuals or families in touch with others from the same area or at least of the same culture and language. Even in a crowded camp, people can be very lonely.

People who feel helpless should be encouraged to do some useful activity, however limited. They should also talk to stronger or more optimistic people in the community, especially religious leaders.

Crowding and other restrictions cannot always be avoided, but make sure that individuals under stress take advantage of whatever facilities are available. Check that they are getting food, water and medical care for illness.

Rest at night is essential. Encourage the community to reduce noise at night. If necessary, establish quiet hours, such as between 22:00 and 06:00.

People who are looking after children and others who need care may feel overburdened. Try to find others in the family or community who can help. Even an hour or two of relief from caring for children can be a great help.

Advise people to stop using alcohol or drugs. Even too much coffee or black tea can be harmful and prevent proper relaxation.

Physical strength and personality are hard to change. Under stress, weaknesses become more obvious. When stress is removed and people get enough rest their strengths will return. Under stress some people become anxious or unhappy; some cause unhappiness in others too. Conflict between people can

be due to stress. When this happens, rest, relaxation, and separation of those arguing may be the best solution. If serious problems exist in a relationship, ask older or more stable people to help resolve them. Encourage people not to waste energy on arguing but to use their energy productively together to solve the problems that they all face.

### **Dealing with stress through group activities in the family or in the community**

Stress can affect whole groups of people. Stress in an individual causes physical and mental distress. Stress in a community leads to arguments, low morale, low productivity and crime.

Normal communities have social activities that help reduce stress. These include music, dancing, singing, celebrations and sports. They allow people to meet together and be happy together. It is very healthy to enjoy oneself. Even with poor living conditions and plenty of reasons for sadness, such social events should be encouraged. No one should be lost in sadness all the time.



**Singing together is a way of reducing stress**

Refugees often feel isolated because they have left some of their family behind. Meeting other people with whom they can enjoy activities and share worries is an important way of reducing stress. It helps people cope with this difficult phase of their life.

Celebrations need not be elaborate. Music, singing and dancing require little or no equipment or money. Celebrating special cultural and religious days helps people who have had to leave their country. Celebrating birthdays is a way of celebrating life and hope for the future.

Sports and games not only provide physical exercise, but also bring people together. Children usually play spontaneously but adults may need encouragement. Find people in the community who will take responsibility for organizing sports and celebrations.

Doing useful work makes up a large part of normal daily life. It is often not possible in refugee camps or similar settings. The usual domestic tasks of cooking, washing and looking after children are still there but there may be no possibility for work outside the home. Remember that refugees who may seem helpless were once living productive lives and may be used to hard work. Productive activity is good therapy. Try to stimulate productive activities. If necessary, ask the refugees to form a group to make administrators aware of the need for collective or productive activity. People who are enabled to work feel less helpless and useless. Working in groups allows the strong to encourage the weaker ones.

### **Educating people about stress**

People under stress can be supported both within a group or as individuals. The first step in this supportive process is to inform and educate them about stress.

People under stress need to be educated to recognize and deal with their stress. Many of the causes of stress are obvious to anyone yet people often do not realize that stress is causing their symptoms. Proper understanding of stress reassures people that they do not have a physical illness and are not going crazy. They also need to know that they can help themselves recover.

People can learn to help themselves and get help from others. Just as sleep relieves tiredness, stress is relieved by simple relaxation exercises that anyone can learn.

It is normal to be tired after a day's work and sleep usually relieves this tiredness. But sleep is not always enough, so we are not always totally fresh and happy when we wake up. In this way, stress builds up from day to day. It stops the mind and body from working properly. Different problems arise in different people, depending on which part of them is weakest. When the body and mind get enough rest they will heal themselves.

Alcohol and drugs must not be used to combat stress. Their pleasant effects last only a short time. Their harmful effects last longer. They can make stress worse and do great damage to mind and body. Alcohol and drugs will make anxiety, depression and sleeping problems worse and will reduce appetite and strength. They can also lead to loss of family, friends and the ability to work.

Stress affects the whole community. No one should feel that only he or she has this problem. When recovering from stress everyone needs help from other people.

As a refugee worker you can identify people under stress. You can educate them about stress and teach them relaxation exercises. You should also educate their family and friends about the needs of a person under stress. Relatives and friends can give practical help by making sure that the stressed person gets proper food and drink and keeps to a regular routine of rest and activity. They can also look after children and give love and emotional support. The family should encourage positive activities and not concentrate on the individual's physical and mental complaints. It is important to avoid criticism and conflict.

Sometimes individuals become very distressed, perhaps because of very severe stress such as that caused by the absence or death of relatives. Other people can be supportive just by being with them and quietly listening to or comforting them.

If there are many people who have been separated from their families and are now by themselves, bring them together in pairs or small groups. Ask them to take responsibility for each other and take care of each other.

Even when conditions are very bleak everyone should have some useful activity. This makes people feel more able to improve their situation.

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***Text to read or hand out to people under stress***

I want to tell you something about stress and how you can help yourself by learning relaxation exercises.

Our body and our muscles are much more active than we think. When people are anxious or brooding they often squeeze or tense their muscles. This is why we use expressions like "tense expectation" (use an expression from your own culture, if possible). Is this bad? Yes and no. Often it is not bad and may even be very positive. Being afraid is a kind of alarm so it is very useful. It alerts people and prepares them for quick action. Therefore your body and your muscles become tense when you are afraid. You have to be ready to act, to run, to fight or to jump. For example, maybe you heard that an enemy was approaching the place where you lived. Maybe you got scared, your body became tense and you escaped.

Unfortunately people also often worry about things they do not need to worry about. Sometimes people continue to worry when the threatening situation is over or is not really dangerous any longer. Some people worry about minor problems. For example, people try to do their best in their life but they always wonder whether what they do is good enough. This creates unnecessary fear and worries which in turn may lead to tension in the body. In the long term this can be harmful. When muscles stay tense for a long time this can lead to physical complaints such as pain in different parts of the body.

This creates an additional worry. Someone who is stressed does not feel well and may live in difficult circumstances. The person may get less pleasure from playing with children, from talking to people, or from making love. In other words, fears and worries lead to muscle tension which can result in bodily complaints. These complaints increase the fears and worries, which lead to more muscle tension and so on. People may feel as if they are in a spiral of constantly increasing anxiety.

If a person succeeds in reducing tension, physical complaints will be reduced and will be easier to handle. The person will feel more relaxed and will be better able to cope with worries. People will have more energy to deal with the real problems they face.

To become really relaxed you need to exercise daily. Like a child learning to walk or to talk, you need to practise relaxation. Gradually you will learn to relax. You will get more control over the tense feelings, and be troubled less by the complaints.

Try to find a quiet moment and a quiet place. You can do the exercises with your partner or with other family members who feel stressed. Make sure that you are not disturbed by other people.

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### **Teaching relaxation exercises**

Exercise first with a colleague or a friend. Ask the other person to comment whether the pitch, rhythm and speed of your voice help them to relax. Pause for 4–6 seconds between phrases. Pause for about 10 seconds when you change the exercise from one part of the body to another. The relaxation exercise below should take about 15 minutes.

During the first two weeks try to do the exercise at least twice a week with the whole group or the individual you want to help. If you have a tape recorder, record the exercise, give the tape to the participants, and ask them to exercise daily. From the third to the fifth week ask the participants to exercise twice a day for 10–15 minutes. They can do this on their own. Forgetting part of the text is no problem; just doing the exercise will be enough. After about six weeks the participants can exercise in situations and at times when they find it difficult to cope.

### **Text for relaxation exercise**

You are lying on the floor. Your eyes are open and you are looking at the ceiling. Close your eyes.

Feel yourself lying on the floor. Feel how heavy you are. Press the heel of your right foot hard against the floor. Feel the muscles in your right leg becoming hard and stiff. Now release the pressure of your heel against the ground and sigh. Feel your right leg becoming soft and relaxed. Lift your right leg a little way above the ground. Feel the muscles you need for this. Your left leg is doing nothing and is lying motionless on the floor. Lower your right leg back to the floor. Feel your right leg lying heavily on the ground. Your right leg is feeling tired. You can feel the warmth in the muscles of your right leg.

Press the heel of your left foot hard against the floor. Feel the muscles in your left leg becoming hard and stiff. Now release the pressure of your heel against the ground and sigh. Feel your left leg becoming soft and relaxed. Lift your left leg a little way above the ground. Feel the muscles you need for this. Your right leg is doing nothing and is lying motionless on the floor. Lower your left leg back to the floor. Feel your left leg lying heavily on the ground. Your left leg is feeling tired. You can feel the warmth in the muscles of your left leg.

Now press the muscles in your buttocks together. You can feel the lower half of your body becoming hard and stiff. Now stop squeezing and sigh. Feel the lower part of your body becoming soft and relaxed. Feel your pelvis lying broadly and heavily on the floor.

Press your right hand hard against the floor. Feel the muscles in your right arm becoming hard and stiff. Now release the pressure of your right hand against the ground and sigh. Feel your right arm becoming soft and relaxed. Lift your right arm a little way above the ground. Feel the muscles you need for this. Your left arm is doing nothing and is lying motionless on the floor. Lower your right arm back to the floor. Feel your right arm lying heavily on the ground. Your right arm is feeling tired. You can feel the warmth in the muscles of your right arm.

Press your left hand hard against the floor. Feel the muscles in your left arm becoming hard and stiff. Now release the pressure of your left hand against the ground and sigh. Feel your left arm becoming soft and relaxed. Lift your left arm a little way above the ground. Feel the muscles you need for this. Your right arm is doing nothing and is lying motionless on the floor. Lower your left arm back to the floor. Feel your left arm lying heavily on the ground. Your left arm is feeling tired. You can feel the warmth in the muscles of your left arm.

Press your shoulders hard against the floor. Feel the muscles in your shoulders becoming hard and stiff. Now release the pressure of your shoulders on the ground and sigh. Feel your shoulders becoming soft and relaxed. Feel how warm and heavy your shoulders are.

Press your head hard against the floor. Feel the muscles in your neck becoming hard and stiff. Now release the pressure of your head against the ground and sigh. Feel your neck becoming soft and relaxed again. Now lift your head a little way above the floor. Feel the muscles you need for this. The rest of your body is doing nothing. Now lower your head to the ground. Feel how heavy and tired your head is. Put your hands on your stomach. Feel your stomach becoming warm. Put your arms alongside your body again. Feel your whole body. The warmth, the weight, the relaxation.

### *Another type of relaxation exercise*

This is another, more mental, relaxation exercise. It may fit more easily in your culture or in the culture where you are working. It is an easy and pleasant exercise.

- Sit comfortably, preferably in a quiet place, with your feet flat on the floor.
- Close your eyes.
- Breathe easily through the nose.
- Fix your attention on your muscles and feel how they become a little more relaxed every time you breathe out. Do this for two to three minutes.
- Now imagine that each time you breathe in you take in energy and health. Every time you breathe out you get rid of some tension and stress. Do this for two to three minutes.
- Now remember some pleasant and beautiful place you have visited in the past. Imagine you are there now. Let your mind rest easily in this place.
- When other thoughts come into your mind, just watch them come in and go out again. You see that thoughts come and go by themselves. Even worrying or unpleasant thoughts will go if you do not pursue them.
- You are resting deeply in a pleasant place. Remember what it looks like, sounds like, feels like. Let other thoughts come and go on the surface of your mind.
- After about 10 minutes say goodbye to this pleasant place, but remember that you will return there again.
- Take some deep breaths and then open your eyes.

This exercise can be done as often as you like, at least once a day.

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### **Physical exercise**

Physical exercise is necessary for good health and is useful in reducing stress. Even someone who is very tired — after a long journey, for instance — should have some exercise each day. Walking is very good exercise, especially for those over 45 years of age or in poor health. Younger people should do something more active — swimming, football or whatever is suitable in the circumstances.

(If daily life in the camp already requires a lot of walking then many people will not need this advice.)

### **Simple massage**

Massage is widely used in many cultures to relieve tension and promote health. Find out what is common in the culture of the refugees and whether there is anyone who can help teach and give massage.

People can massage themselves, or other members of their family; parents can massage their children. The ideal time for massage is in the morning as part of the daily washing or bathing routine. If vegetable oil is available, it should be used. Oil is best if slightly warmed.

If there is time, massage the whole body. Use the whole hand to massage firmly up and down the long bones of the arms and legs. After travel, massage of the soles of the feet is particularly soothing.

As well as reducing tension, massage promotes health.

### **Ways of improving sleep**

Proper sleep is very important both for avoiding stress and for coping with it. Getting proper sleep is part of staying healthy. The body's rhythm of waking and sleeping should be in tune with the rhythm of day and night.

People with stress often have trouble falling asleep, or they wake up in the night. They may sleep during the day. Explain the importance of a regular routine. Everyone should have a regular bedtime.

Remind people that, even if they are not asleep, resting quietly in bed is good for them. Most people who think that they lie awake the whole night usually sleep quite a lot without knowing it. Ask the family or neighbours of a person under stress to help keep things quiet at night and to go to bed at about the same time every night. A regular routine is very important.

People should, however, associate their bed with the idea of sleep. Therefore a person who has not gone off to sleep after half an hour should get up for a while and wait until feeling sleepy again, and then go back to bed. If the person is still awake after another half an hour, he or she should get up and repeat the procedure.



**People with stress often have trouble falling asleep**

### **Rules that will help restore normal sleep**

- Do not smoke, eat or drink during the night.
- Do not read or listen to music at night and avoid listening to the radio or watching television late into the evening.
- Avoid coffee and black tea, especially in the evening.
- Eat your evening meal no later than 19:00 if possible.
- Do not take alcohol or drugs. They may put you to sleep but they destroy the normal pattern of sleep and you will wake up feeling bad. Avoid sedative medicines and never take them without a doctor's advice.
- A warm sweet drink (e.g. milk, but not coffee or tea) is good before bedtime.
- A light walk in the evening also helps, but not heavy or energetic exercise.
- Avoid arguments in the evenings.
- Do not sleep during the day, unless a short rest in the afternoon is normal for the climate and culture.
- The area between the eyebrows may be massaged gently and slowly for a few minutes before sleep.

### **Breathing exercises**

Before starting breathing exercises with anyone, explain what hyperventilation is and what to do about it.

#### **Hyperventilation**

What is hyperventilation?

Some people complain of not being able to get enough air, even though there is nothing wrong with their lungs or heart. They feel anxious or faint and may have tingling sensations in their hands or lips. They may have a tight feeling in their chest. They may feel dizzy. (But remember, dizziness can also be caused by anaemia or low blood pressure.) Others see mist before their eyes, or their heart may pound. People have these complaints because they are breathing too much or breathing incorrectly. The harder they try to breathe, the worse they feel. Some people start breathing wrongly by taking deep breaths. It is better not to breathe too deeply.

### What to do

Two simple things can help:

- Breathe slowly and deeply (but not *too* deeply). Pause slightly between breaths.
- Breathe with the abdomen and diaphragm, not with the chest and ribs. To teach people this, do the exercise below.

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### **Text for breathing exercise to stop hyperventilation**

Lie on the floor or on a bed. Put both hands on your stomach between your navel and your groin. Feel your abdomen with your hands. You can feel the warmth on your hands. Breathe in so that your stomach swells up and becomes round. Breathe out so that your stomach goes in again. Breathe in so that your stomach swells up and becomes round, breathe out so that your stomach goes in again.

Concentrate on the movement of your stomach for a while. Feel how relaxed and heavy you are becoming. Your thoughts are fading away. You are starting to feel good.

When you have done these exercises you will feel heavy, warm and comfortable. Your breathing is calm. I will now count to five:

One, start to move your feet and legs.

Two, start to move your hands and arms.

Three, move your head.

Four, open your eyes, look at the ceiling.

Five, stretch completely from your toes to the tips of your fingers.

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The breathing exercise below will take about 5 minutes. First, try it with a colleague or a friend.

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### **Text for a breathing exercise**

Lie on the floor or on a bed. Place your hands on your stomach. Close your eyes or turn them towards your stomach. Feel the parts of your body that are in contact with the floor or the bed — your heels, your calves, your bottom, your back, the back of your arms, and the back of your head. Try to relax your stomach so that your breathing can reach the lower part of your stomach in a natural way. Pay close attention to the movements of your stomach and your hands.

Count to two slowly in your mind while breathing in. Then count to four when breathing out. Wait patiently until you feel the natural need to breathe in again. Breathe quietly the way you usually do.

I will now start counting with you. 1, 2; 1, 2, 3, 4, and a pause; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3, 4, and a pause; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3, 4, and a pause; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3, 4, and a pause; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3, 4, and a pause.

Go on like this until you feel you are breathing steadily.

(The "1, 2" to breathe in should take about 3–4 seconds, the "1, 2, 3, 4, and a pause" to breathe out, about 10 seconds.)

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The person can practise this exercise as often as he or she likes. It should help the person to breathe normally at all times.

### **Other ways to cope with stress**

Many cultures have a way of meditating. Find out whether there is anyone in your community who can teach meditation. Experienced teachers would be a great help. The ways of meditating used in the culture can be as effective as the other methods of reducing stress that have been described in this unit. They may in fact be more effective because people are familiar with them.

Most meditation techniques require:

- a quiet atmosphere;
- a comfortable posture;
- a "mental device" (a word, a sound, a symbol);
- a passive mental state.

This is true not only for relaxation techniques but also for yoga (e.g. hatha-yoga), elements of Sufism, Buddhism and Taoism, reciting verses from the Koran and certain forms of mysticism.

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## UNIT 3

# Functional complaints

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### **Learning objectives**

After studying this unit you should be able to:

1. Recognize people with functional complaints.
  2. Understand that serious psychological or psychiatric disorders may be causing functional complaints.
  3. Help people who have functional complaints.
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Every health worker (and relief worker) knows people who tell a long story about many vague physical complaints. Although the health worker asks many questions to find out if these complaints relate to a specific disease, it is still not clear what disease the person is suffering from. Sometimes the health worker is almost sure what disease is producing these complaints, but then the person has other complaints that do not fit into the normal pattern of the disease.

The health worker may also feel that these people with vague and varied complaints are different from others. Sometimes they seem to insist too much about their complaints. They seem to worry more than is necessary about their unidentifiable illness. The health worker may find it difficult to interrupt such people as they talk about their complaints. Some of them will not give clear answers to the health worker's questions.

Often such people have been to many health workers and local healers without finding relief. They may have used a variety of medicines without feeling any better. Others have had their stools, their urine or their blood examined several times. Even when a parasite or a disease was found and treated, their complaints continued or went away only for a short time.

When people behave in this way the health worker may feel irritated, uneasy or even powerless. Sometimes the health worker will prescribe some medicine and hope that the person will not return. However, a couple of weeks later, the person comes back with the same or similar complaints. This can all be very frustrating.

### What are functional complaints?

Persons such as those described above have the following features:

- They have physical complaints, but it is hard or impossible to detect a disease.
- They may have many symptoms or vague symptoms, such as “pains all over the body” or “feeling weak all the time”.
- They may have a minor disease, but this disease cannot account for the numerous or vague physical problems that they complain of.

These complaints are called “functional complaints” or “somatizations”. People with this problem are sometimes called “somatizers”, “chronic (neurotic) complainers” or “functional complainers”. The term “functional complaint” is used because the complaint seems to have a function or use for the person.



**People with functional complaints may have been to many health workers without finding relief**

People with functional complaints are very common in any situation where health care is provided. Some 20–30% of adults who come to a health care facility have this kind of problem. In stressful situations this problem can occur even more often. When a refugee camp is threatened from outside, or when people are afraid about their legal status, complaints such as these often become more common.

**What function do these complaints fulfil?**

- Some people have an underlying personal or social problem. They find it hard to talk about this problem but find it easier to talk about physical complaints. Some are afraid that if they talk about their personal problems, they may be thought of as mentally ill.
- Some people may think that this is the way to talk to health workers or relief workers. They may have been taught that you go to a health facility to talk about physical complaints. Taking the role of someone who is ill may be easier than explaining a personal problem.
- Their culture may have taught them to express their problems through their body. It is as if the culture prescribes that, when you have personal problems, you may express them through the body.
- Some people may not realize that they have personal problems. Yet the stress created by these problems shows itself in their bodies. This is explained in Unit 2, *Stress and relaxation*.
- Some people feel that certain sensations or feelings in their body are painful or threatening. Everyone feels pain now and then but some people pay more attention to these sensations.
- The last possibility is that these complaints are symptoms of a more serious disorder. The complaints might be a symptom of depression, anxiety disorder or alcohol abuse, or they may be the consequence of serious violence, torture, or rape (see Units 8 and 9).

**How to recognize underlying serious psychological or psychiatric disorders**

***Depression***

As described in Unit 2, people with depression usually have serious complaints: they are irritable and sad, have no energy and lose weight. Most depressed people have difficulty falling asleep. Often they also wake up too early. In the morning they may again be troubled by feelings of sadness or by their functional complaints.

Depressed people may feel unable to do things that are normal in their culture, such as chatting with people, attending ceremonies or preparing a meal. They may feel hopeless or have difficulty in seeing any worthwhile future. They may lose interest in life, and suffer from lack of energy and constant tiredness.

Depressed people may have had a similar problem before; their depression may have come and gone several times.

For more about the difference between someone with functional complaints and a depressed person, see Unit 4, page 42.

### ***Anxiety disorder***

Like the complaints of persons suffering from depression, anxiety disorders are more serious than functional complaints. People with an anxiety disorder may have symptoms such as sweating and hot and cold flushes. The heart may pound, and the person may suffer from strong feelings of anxiety, panic or worry. Ask questions such as “Do you ever feel really panicky and tense?” Unit 4 explains more about the difference between functional complaints and anxiety disorder.

The panic attacks may be accompanied by incorrect breathing, which is called hyperventilation. The symptoms and the treatment of hyperventilation can be found in Unit 2, page 29.

### ***Alcohol abuse***

You can often recognize people who are drinking too much alcohol by the smell of alcohol or the trembling of their hands. For more information, see Unit 7, page 101.

### ***Violence or torture***

Some symptoms may be a consequence of serious violence or torture. This may be the case when people complain that they:

- think all the time about a painful experience from the past;
- feel as though they are undergoing the same experience again;
- have bad dreams and nightmares;
- have lost interest in life;
- have poor concentration, poor memory, or tell the same story over and over again;
- feel afraid or nervous.

If the person or the family has suffered extreme violence, see Unit 8, page 110.

### **How to help people with functional complaints**

This section outlines nine steps to help people with functional complaints.

#### *Step 1*

##### **Make sure the person is examined physically.**

If you are a relief worker without medical training, refer the person to a health worker. Ask the health worker to give the person a medical check-up. Tell the health worker (personally or by letter) that you think that some personal or social problem may be behind the complaints. Ask the health worker to make a diagnosis and to provide treatment. Ask the health worker to send the person back to you if the complaints do not disappear or if there really do seem to be other problems behind the complaints.

If you are a health worker, examine and treat the person as described above. Avoid unnecessary examinations or referrals to specialists or laboratories unless you think the person has a serious physical disease.

Step 1 is important because if there is a physical disease you need to take care of it. You are also showing that you respect the person. By taking the complaints seriously you can build up trust. If there is no physical disease, you will need that feeling of trust for the following steps.

#### *Step 2*

##### **Tell the person the results of the examination and the treatment.**

#### *Step 3*

##### **Reassure the person that the symptoms are not the beginning of a serious illness.**

Recognize that there is a problem but tell the person that this problem will not lead to more serious illness. Say that you can tell that the symptoms are real, even when there is no clear physical cause.

Never say, "There is nothing wrong." For the person with the problem, something is certainly wrong.

Do not give medicines. Giving medication will make it more difficult for the person to understand what is causing the complaints. It will also stop you from working towards solving the underlying problem.

*Step 4*

**Explain in simple words that people sometimes find the normal functions of their body painful or threatening.**

It is wise to suggest this in general terms without referring to the person's own complaints. Explain that everyone at some time experiences pain. You might say, for example, "We all feel pain and discomfort. We all have headaches or cramps in our stomach now and then. This is part of normal life."

*Step 5*

**Explain in simple words how bodily symptoms can be caused by emotional reactions or problems.**

If the person does not believe you, you could say, "When people are anxious they get tension in their neck muscles and this causes headaches." Or you could mention a saying in the local language that explains the link between stress and complaints. (Every language has expressions like "Worrying too much makes your knees weak" or "Many sorrows turn your stomach into a stone".)

If the person finds it difficult to see the link between the complaints and the underlying social and personal problems, do not argue that such a link exists. This kind of psychological understanding is not necessary to help the person.

Instead, ask how the complaints affect the person's life. A woman may tell you she has less time to care for her children and that this makes her husband angry. The answer will often give you a hint of the underlying social or personal problem or tell you what is really causing the complaints.

*Step 6*

**Help the person to relax** (see Unit 2).

*Step 7*

**Help the person to solve the social and personal problems.**

Step 5, above, will help start this process.

Simply listening to the person may already be a help. Also talk about the person's problems and ask about or give advice on changes that could be made. An easy way to do this is as follows:

- Make a list of what the person regards as the problems, in order of importance.
- Sort out together which problems can be tackled given the circumstances in which the person lives.
- Help the person to think of different ways to solve the problems and select the best way to solve them one by one.
- Encourage the person to take action and see how it improves the situation.
- Talk about the positive aspects of the action.

*Step 8*

**Try to find out if there are other resources available, such as family members or friends.**

Can they provide any form of social support? Also find out if the person can be involved in productive activities that might help to generate income or to rebuild self-esteem.

*Step 9*

**Be firm in not giving medicines, but also invite the person to visit you again.**

The person should not think that your refusal to give medicines means that you want to break the contact. Suggest another visit in one or two months "to keep in touch and see how you are doing".